

The Key to Ukrainian Victory is Partnering (not Ukrainifying)

Description

Speaking recently at the National Defense University, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy emphasized the basis for Ukraine's continued fight against Russian aggression: domestic resilience and international perseverance. Despite significant improvements in Ukraine's strategic position, these central themes have remained consistent since early 2022. Largely due to the combined impact of Ukrainian [resistance](#) and NATO military assistance, Ukrainian forces have made incredible progress, surpassing nearly all [expectations](#) held before the war. However, Ukraine is at an inflection point. Without sustained international support, its emerging internal strengths risk being overwhelmed and defeated by Russian innovation and potentially outmaneuvered by [Chinese](#), [North Korean](#), and [Iranian-backed](#) counteroffensives.

Some have argued that the solution is to "Ukrainify" NATO's approach and let the partner call the shots. While it is certainly true that Ukrainian forces have vast experience in trench warfare along the front lines, it is not true that continuing such an approach is in the country's best interest. Indeed, preserving the battle lines for an extended period risks catastrophic failure. It is naïve to assume Ukraine has the right strategy simply because they have matured in operational experience. Even a cursory glance at US strategies in Afghanistan and Iraq shows how easily grand goals and detailed plans can be disconnected from operational reality. Equally important, Ukraine lacks the domestic means to sustain and win in Russia's preferred war of attrition; the current battles over US funding mask [sustainment challenges](#) across the entire defense enterprise. Neither is there evidence to justify a radical rejection of ongoing [training](#) models.

Instead, a closer examination of Special Operations Forces (SOF) training for Ukraine reveals a successful model worth emulating. This article examines the history of this training, highlighting three key skills developed through a SOF-enabled, partnered approach and advocates for leveraging these partnerships to transition away from trench warfare.

Special Operations Training in Ukraine: Adaptation and Partnership

US SOF began training the Ukrainian Special Operations Forces (UKRSOF) in [2015](#). Much of that initial instruction emphasized switching from a Spetsnaz approach focused on site seizure and targeted assassination to a more comprehensive irregular warfare ([IW](#)) skillset. Partly due to the small-unit

instruction inherent in SOF training and partly due to their comparatively small footprint in the Ukrainian military, UKRSOF made this transition quickly. Four years after initiating the training program, UKRSOF received NATO [interoperability](#) certification. Three years after that, they helped stop the Russian takeover of [Hostomel](#) Airfield and prevented Russian reinforcements from the northeast. Both actions effectively saved Kyiv and Ukraine in the early days of the war.

Building on these early successes, Task Group-Ukraine (TG-U) is currently responsible for training, equipping, and advising UKRSOF. This group is part of a bigger joint special operations team, Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force 10 (CJSOTF-10), which collaborates with conventional military, interagency, and NATO partners through the Security Assistance Group-Ukraine (SAG-U). Through long-term collaborative training with Ukrainian and NATO partners, TG-U harnesses a wealth of diverse expertise. As the war shifts towards entrenched and defensive strategies, the adaptable skills developed by TG-U will likely prove essential in achieving tactical advances on the front lines.

Three skills in particular have made an outsized impact on UKRSOF. The first and perhaps most important is mission command at the tactical level. As a hallmark of Special Operations across the Joint Force, TG-U teaches UKRSOF the fundamentals of small-unit tactics. It also provides instruction on the value of localized decision-making to higher headquarters. Employing a “spider web” approach across human and technical networks, UKRSOF has become more deeply integrated within the Ukrainian military writ large, and through CJSOTF-10, the international partner forces supporting them. Effective mission command was clearly evident in the early days of the war and in advance of the first Ukrainian [counteroffensive](#). This dynamic has continued, with UKRSOF effectively serving as force multipliers alongside other units and demonstrating their capabilities as force generators in their own right.

The second critical skill set taught by TG-U is the ability to develop, plan, execute, and assess SOF-specific missions that provide discrete options, and integrate with the broader Ukrainian Armed Forces. Previous training in special reconnaissance and sabotage bolstered Ukraine’s early defenses in 2022. Additional skill sets include direct action against high-value targets, terminal guidance for precision munitions, and support for information operations. Each has been highlighted through activities in and around [Bakhmut](#), [Awdiivka](#), [Kherson](#), and over-the-horizon strikes in [Crimea](#). Together, these have added operational depth to the Ukrainian Armed Forces and expanded the operational challenges facing Moscow’s strategy in Ukraine.

Third, Special Operations training prioritizes flexibility, adaptability, and innovation. Two examples are noteworthy: drone adaptation and battlefield medicine. [Ukrainian domestic innovation](#) has accelerated the pace of [drone warfare](#). Building on earlier lessons from the [Syrian Civil War](#), Ukraine has expanded the sources of innovation to include civilian start-up companies and individual “irregular” partners

alongside [government efforts](#) across the research-development-procurement process. The combined effort has increased the [lethality](#) of unmanned aerial systems (UAS) through greater carrying capacity, longer range and flying time, and low visibility [first person view](#)• spotter drones. Ukrainian drones are effectively demoralizing as much as [destroying](#) Russian warfighting [capabilities](#). The [successes](#) seen on the battlefield [destroyed armored personnel carriers, next-generation T-90 tanks,](#) electronic warfare platforms, and command posts [have degraded Russia's](#) ability to conduct effective operations across the front lines. These achievements, however, are not solely the result of the emerging skills of the Ukrainian forces, as impressive as their determination has been in the last two years. Crucially, they also stem from the enduring partnerships and collaborative efforts developed with US and NATO SOF over the past decade.

Drone warfare and Russian defections rightly receive attention, as have the higher profile [HIMARS](#) and [guided munition](#) strikes by Ukrainian conventional forces. What has not been as widely known is how SOF training enables those strikes by broadening Ukrainian skills and resources. US and NATO SOF trainers provide more than field manuals for [urban assault](#) and [resistance training](#). TG-U has also linked elements across the SOF enterprise, including Civil Affairs partnerships with US private sector companies at the leading edge of drone technology and Psychological Operational Detachments (PSYDET), expanding Ukrainian messaging capabilities.

Ukrainian drone strikes have increased the scope of vulnerable targets, and Ukrainian PSYOP teams have exploited that vulnerability with traditional loudspeaker vehicles and social media targeting. They have also used drones as methods of surrender, dropping leaflets and signaling to Russian defectors fleeing the battlefield. The nexus of training, equipping, and advising can be seen in the thousands of Russian [defections](#).

SOF medical training has also prioritized adaptability and innovation, which itself contributes to battlefield survivability in frontline Ukrainian units. Conducted by US Special Forces Medics and Navy Corpsmen, training includes coordination with US companies providing 3D printers to produce [cricothyrotomy kits](#). Modeled on the SOF [depth-in-breadth](#) approach, UKRSOF teams practice with the kits as part of basic combat medicine training and keep practicing when they return to the front lines. Support continues through telemedicine advising during and after operations.

The enhanced effectiveness of drones and improved [golden hour](#)• treatment demonstrate more than immediate benefits. These advancements highlight the success of US training with Ukrainian forces, facilitated by a network of collaboration that extends beyond military and government agencies to include international and non-governmental partners.

Remote Partnership and Reverse Burden Sharing in Action

The SOF-enabled approach does not require a large in-country presence. In fact, some aspects can be done remotely. CJSOTF-10 developed a Remote Advise and Assist Cell (RAAC) to coordinate live streaming battlefield awareness for UKRSOF and their supported conventional units. The RAAC uses various commercially available software to facilitate connections between civilian experts and military personnel, enhancing tactical mission command and innovation away from the front lines. Lessons learned are then quickly developed for TG-U modules and influence equipment procurement through SAG-U, such as the refurbishing of artillery tubes to extend their use during equipment shortages. This process exemplifies the comprehensive SOF [support cycle](#).

The effectiveness of that cycle became evident in January 2023, when, after nearly a decade of IW training, the Ukrainian Special Operations Command requested a modification in the training curriculum. Previously, students completed a condensed version of the US Special Forces Qualification Course in about five months. However, due to Russian defenses impeding Ukrainian progress and expected high casualty rates in a planned spring [counteroffensive](#), there was an urgent need to enhance UKRSOF capabilities, particularly in specialized breaching techniques.

Drawing on decades of collaboration during the Global War on Terror, NATO SOF partners have specialized in different aspects of irregular warfare while ensuring they can work seamlessly with one another and with conventional forces. This shared experience allowed TG-U to develop an innovative “reverse burden sharing” training approach, leveraging the specialized strengths of various partners instead of depending solely on US SOF. Under this model, each member contributes what it can with training facilities, tactics, and equipment for breaching fortified defenses. TG-U coordinates these efforts with US SOF, handling administrative and logistical roles and freeing others to focus on their areas of expertise. The revamped curriculum emphasizes light infantry skills like those of the US Army Rangers, reducing the time needed away from the front lines to just six weeks. This training incorporates Ukrainian combat experiences and NATO standards, symbolizing a new step in the evolution of Ukrainian and partner SOF.

Real Challenges Remain

Despite the effectiveness of SOF training and employment, Ukraine still faces significant challenges in achieving victory. Issues such as the uncertainty of continued Western support and the increasing sophistication of [Russian drone attacks](#) are growing concerns. Additionally, entrenched [Soviet-era mindsets](#) within the Ukrainian military limit its operational adaptability. Perhaps most concerning is Ukraine’s limited ability to employ brigade-sized elements at any single point, let alone at multiple points along the front lines.

Yet, UKRSOF can help address this problem. For example, the Ukrainian Rangers were specifically trained to create, hold, and exploit gaps for conventional units to advance through breaches. Further developments in drone capabilities and employment can also add air elements to [surge](#) at those breakout points. Special Operations Forces can and should be employed in that role, even as they continue to adapt to changing battlefield conditions. The real challenge remains convincing a partner to go against years of Soviet doctrine that includes almost a decade of defensive trench warfare. Persistent partnerships through SAG-U and CJSOTF-10 can help in that regard.

The Way Ahead: Partnered, SOF-Enabled Strategy

As a result, those who argue for “Ukrainifying” the relationship are only considering one aspect of Ukraine’s trench warfare experience and even this view is incomplete. These observers fail to account for the role of Special Operations thus far and in the coming fights. Even worse, to accept the inevitability of attritional war would doom Ukraine to a [frozen conflict](#) that Russia can more easily win. Moscow has a long history of [pinioning](#) weaker neighbors, even as increasing international [partnerships](#) can compensate for its critical losses in Ukraine.

In the meantime, Russian defenses will remain formidable even as the escalating scale of [Russian casualties](#) increases their motivation to strengthen fortifications over time. Simply falling back on defensive trench warfare will not lead Ukraine to victory in the long-term. Instead of “Ukrainifying” their approach, the Ukrainian military needs to focus on leveraging partner expertise, specifically to identify, defeat, and exploit [Russian vulnerabilities](#) to break through the current lines. Special Operations help enable those options through a network of partnerships that multiply combat power and innovate options to use it. Ukraine would be wise to apply those lessons now, before they are forced into a war of attrition they may not win.

Disclaimer: The views expressed are the author’s and do not represent official US Government, Department of Defense, or National Defense University positions.

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Main image: Ukrainian Special Operations Forces and U.S. Army Special Forces Soldiers assigned to 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) move across an objective during exercise Combined Resolve XI at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, December 10, 2018. During Combined Resolve XI, an exercise with over 5,500 participants from 16 nations, SOF conducted

operations in enemy-occupied territory to support and interoperate with conventional forces. (1st Lt. Benjamin Haulenbeek via U.S. Army)

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