

# SOF-SPACE-CYBER TRIAD IN ACTION: RECLAIMING THE INITIATIVE IN UKRAINE

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Ukraine's recent incursion into the Kursk region of Russia has temporarily rekindled Western interest in the war. Yet, despite reclaiming the strategic initiative, the circumstances of Ukraine's survival remain dire. Frozen battle lines along a vast front have depleted Ukrainian morale as much as manpower, and the potential for Russian advances will continue to threaten them for the foreseeable future. Ukraine can only survive by winning an increasingly desperate fight, but victory is constrained by the nature of its partnership in war. Sustaining munitions remains paramount and, while long-range artillery and logistics dominate the policy debates, Special Operations partnerships have also been essential to Ukraine's survival.

Ukraine needs to maneuver to win, as evidenced in the first year of the war and the recent cross-border advances. Unfortunately, its armed forces lack the necessary staff officers to sustain those efforts with a military culture still wedded to Soviet-style mass attacks. The effect has been to relegate special operations forces (SOF) to "elite infantry" roles supporting conventional units. Yet special operations include a range of irregular warfare capabilities to menace enemy positions and mobilize civil resistance behind the lines. The exploitation of breakouts and harrying attacks inside of Russia are well within the realm of special operations capabilities. They are also some of the only Ukrainian units enabling concentrated fire on Russian vulnerabilities while drawing attention away from their own defenses. However, from the early victories around Kyiv through the ongoing battles in the marshes above Crimea, Ukrainian special operations forces (UKRSOF) are sustaining Ukraine's war effort in ways that do not receive widespread attention.

Making matters more difficult, the West has yet to arrive at a consensus on what Ukraine is as a partner, let alone where it should go after current hostilities end. Ukraine is not a proxy against Russian aggression nor is it a novice in the struggle against Moscow's predations. Ukraine is a partner fighting a centuries-old battle to remain free. As a result, the lack of Western consensus cedes the strategic initiative to Russia and creates confusion as to how to fight and win the war. This has led to critical missed opportunities on the battlefield, opportunities Ukraine will run out of if fundamental changes are not made.

The most time-sensitive goal is to prioritize special operations as a force multiplier and operational "connective tissue" across Ukraine's military. As a pillar in the *SOF-Cyber-Space Triad*, special operations provide decision makers with diverse, multidomain, and transregional networks to operationalize innovation across partnerships. This enables SOF to produce discrete options that impose costs on adversaries while building partner capacity to do the same.

Note: Yellow and blue text denote hyperlinks.



Ukrainian soldier holding Ukraine flag  
in front of bombed building.  
Photo provided by Adobe Stock



The Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF) model applies lessons learned fighting non-state actors to campaigning against peer adversaries. It also sharpens the skills needed to help partner forces defeat a global adversary. The small-unit, network approach to special operations enables them to adapt to changing battlefield conditions more quickly than larger units. Innovations in drones grab the headlines; equally important have been SOF innovations in communications, logistics, and battlefield medicine keeping Ukrainians alive and in the fight. So far, UKRSOF partnerships across the Triad have contributed to the destruction of more than **\$1 billion of Russian combat power** and a generation of **Russian military leadership**.

As masters of human networks, SOF connect diverse communities of expertise – from intergovernmental and interagency to commercial and academic – in order to develop solutions to critical problems. Ukraine needs the full breadth of those partnerships because it cannot survive a conventional war without special operations playing a more central role. Saying so goes against the tide of cuts to U.S. special operations forces personnel. It also challenges the dominant argument that big conventional movements matter more than surgical strikes that SOF enable. The misconception stems from a larger problem of ignorance of the partner and partner war, one which special operations forces are ideally capable of correcting.

## UNTIMELY IGNORANCE

When the war began more than two years ago, the assessments of Russian strategy and capabilities were almost as wrong as those about Ukraine. Ignorance of “maskirovka,” – camouflage and surprise, and “lazha,” lying with half-truths, led most to assume uncontested Russian superiority. Equally, ignorance of **Ukrainian resilience** missed the longstanding resistance inherent to its culture and historical experience over centuries. Thus, while the reemergence of Russia in U.S. strategic priorities might have begun in 2014, it followed more than 20 years of marginalization in academic and intelligence communities. The periphery of the historic Russian empire remained even more under examined with episodic attention on color revolutions or flaring military conflicts, yet subject matter expertise cannot be created after a crisis. The lack of deep, contextual knowledge has meant that U.S. approaches to Ukraine follow a similar pattern in U.S.-led partner wars – functional experts and theorists set the analytical framework and recommendations rather than those who know the partner and adversary deeply.

The communal assessment in February 2022 accepted Russia’s self-proclaimed military superiority and planned for Ukraine’s rapid defeat. In contrast, the relatively few Ukrainian experts and small U.S. special operations forces contingent in Ukraine understood better, as seen in recommendations to the U.S. joint task force preparing for Ukraine’s resistance. However, even though their minority report was quickly proven correct, the lessons of collective ignorance have not led to changes in the approaches to the war in Ukraine.

The consequences of this analytical asymmetry have been all too familiar – oversimplified explanations that produce unsustainable solutions. **Theory-based assertions** that the U.S. and NATO caused Russia to react defensively show as much intellectual laziness as ignorance of the offensive nature of the

Russian Empire. The **recommendation to cede** nearly a quarter of Ukraine’s legal territory may offer a short-term solution to the fighting, but it ignores the Kremlin’s existential need to reclaim all of Russia’s lost empire. Putin carries the weight of history in stamping out a sovereign Ukraine, just as his successors will for the whole of “**Russkiy Mir**.”

Equally so, claiming Ukraine can win a war of **attrition** because defense has the advantage along the front ignores Russia’s long-term opportunistic theory of victory. With China’s expanding financial backing, Russia is able to sustain and increase offensive operations at a higher pace than previously in the war. Neither can Ukraine defend the extent of the front lines over the long-term given mounting battle fatigue and high casualty rates. Even more damaging are losses to the country’s industrial base, energy production, and agricultural capacity. Any resulting Ukrainian defeats imply its unsustainability to undecided international partners. To some, the fall of **Avdiivka** became a harbinger of worse things to come.

The current U.S. and NATO force posture outside of Ukraine means the tyranny of distance hinders some aspects of support. Reintroducing U.S. and NATO **forces into Ukraine** would benefit the “**advise and assist**” mission and could provide a strategic trip wire to deter Russian escalation in Ukraine, including the use of tactical **nuclear weapons**. However, it can also undermine Kyiv’s critical role in deciding how to escalate to deescalate. Even more so, it alleviates some of the pressure currently on Ukraine’s leadership to confront hard adaptations necessary to succeed against Russia.

Fighting and winning a partner war requires understanding the partner, but also how partnerships differ from proxy wars. Proxies enable comparatively safer escalation against peer adversaries because they are indirect relationships; partners must manage escalation together.

Proxies also necessitate multiple control mechanisms through asymmetries in intelligence, resourcing, training, and operational planning. Dependence means unequal decision-making, which weakens the legitimacy of a proxy as a governing agent. The quick collapse of Afghanistan’s government owes much to the proxy relationship that denigrated Afghan leaders to a subservient role in their own country. By contrast, successful U.S.-led partner war involves self-constraint at times. This requires deep contextual knowledge to know when and where to push the partner, and when to support the partner’s leadership. U.S. and NATO partners have decades of integration enabling interoperability and symmetric decision making. Partnership with Ukraine is comparatively new and must first recognize that Ukraine is not a proxy for U.S. escalation against Russia nor is its government unsuited for equal decision making in defending the country’s sovereignty.

## UKRAINE AS A VIABLE PARTNER IN WAR

Even with the de facto loss of territory since 2014, the past three decades represent one of the longest periods of Ukrainian sovereignty over such a large extent of territory. Despite the hardships and grim prospects for the future, the national identity of Ukraine is holding because the country maintains legitimacy as an independent state. The potential to mobilize the population relies on historic legacies of the **Zaporozhe**



Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy address the media at the 24th meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, Sept. 9, 2024.

DoD photo by Chad J. McNeeley

**Cossacks** and the anti-Bolshevik **Poltava Uprising** a century ago. These inspire continued resistance to Ukraine's "eternal foe" in Russia. Government measures to lower the draft age and rebuild depleted forces along the forward lines mean Kyiv still has social capital to expend. In addition, battlefield innovations have expanded well-developed **military research and development**, broadening the scope of **defense partnerships** across the country and internationally. Despite losses to largescale farmlands and agricultural equipment, Ukrainians still have access to self-sustaining food supplies through familial or communal connections to village farming. This, too, bodes well for resilience over time.

However, even with renewed U.S. funding, the country can afford very few failures before serious problems will arise. Given the prevalence of historic corruption and weak federal governance, how long the Ukrainian populace will remain active participants in the fight remains to be seen. There are simply too many living memories of political apathy available to undermine political efficacy. How then to bolster what is still strong, reinforce what is weakening, and restore what has been lost?

Ukraine faces two core challenges from which other problems arise. The first is convincing the West that Ukraine is worthy of sacrifice for the foreseeable future. Strategic balancing adds weight to the argument, but competing alternatives to constrain Russia could sacrifice Ukraine instead. The alarm of further Russian aggression also lost some of its comparative resonance since war erupted in the Middle East and looms larger in the Pacific. Thus, while President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine, remains a visible figure internationally, his "hat in hand" message wears thin on strained Western economies and divided Western electorates.

The second challenge requires Ukrainian decision makers to make fundamental changes to how they approach the war. Foremost is discarding Soviet-era doctrine with its top-heavy decision making and siloed operational planning that has often appeared as "one-size-fits-all." The current battle lines are not uniform with significant variations in population centers, avenues of attack, and topography. Movement from the northern region of Sumy into neighboring Kursk makes sense as ongoing, low-level Russian attacks have hardened rather than weaken local resistance. Equally importantly, flat terrain favors maneuver.

Lands east of the Dnieper also tend to be flat compared to the western Carpathian Mountains, even as the river delta north of Crimea presents distinct operational challenges for combatants attempting to advance. It also presents opportunities to maneuver around marshland islands and assault Russian positions. In contrast, Russian fortifications across former farmlands, as well as around urban centers, make offensive operations there vastly more challenging. The lack of sufficient artillery to weaken those fortifications compounds the difficulties.

Yet despite important variations in the operational landscape, Ukrainian armed forces largely rely on homogenous operational approaches. Overreliance on mass artillery has meant munitions shortages do more than give Russian forces time and space to consolidate gains. It also cedes the operational initiative to an increasingly well-armed enemy. The failure of the previous **counter-offensives** and persistent **sluggishness** of Ukrainian operations also stem from broader leadership problems. One of the core tenets of the SOF-Cyber-Space Triad is that smaller units lead the race to innovate capabilities. Due in large part to SOF partnerships, they are also reshaping Ukraine's tactics, techniques, and procedures. Yet much of that forward-thinking does not reach senior level commanders.

Even with successes in Kursk, Ukraine's ability to sustain effective combined arms maneuver is low, threatening to cut short gains from initially successful advances. The primary reason is a lack of trained staff officers capable of integrating units across multiple domains and areas of operation. The Soviet model of highly concentrated decision-making at higher echelons remains a constant even among new recruits, who quickly gain the most operational experience. Even when not attacking, senior leaders rely on previous Soviet military training, as seen in the decade of defensive **joint force operations** around the Donbas region. That phase of the conflict began and remained an artillery duel along relatively fixed position. In contrast, the first year of the war was characterized by maneuver on multiple fronts. Early victories owed as much to the weakness of Russian forces, as to the shock that Ukrainians could and did maneuver to destroy them. With nearly a decade of partnership, the first generation of **U.S. and NATO trained special operators** galvanized the country's defense in many of those victories against superior Russian forces.

Special operations forces are ideally positioned for asymmetric advantage because they are assessed, selected, and trained based on three core skills: critical problem solving, the ability to build and operate across networks, and leadership. The "team of teams" model highlights modular abilities that can adapt across operational environments as much as between diverse relationships. The ability to engage and harmonize efforts with disparate organizational priorities and cultures requires specific a priori personality traits, as much as advanced training as interlocutors. Despite criticisms of "hammers seeking new nails," the true nature of Special operations forces is more akin to a "Swiss Army Hammer" replete with a range of hard and soft power tools.

Special operations have adapted from a short-lived dominant role in the Global War on Terrorism to include broader support functions in strategic competition. Initially relegated to countering non-state threats, initiatives by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD SO-LIC) and U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)

have reinforced the SOF role across competition, crisis, and conflict. In particular, the relevance of strategic sensors and high value targeting increases as threats proliferate. However, despite recent reviews by defense analysts, much of the discussion about SOF remains superficial. Escalating geostrategic threats require a more detailed case of special operations successfully fulfilling the unique SOF role campaigning in a partner war against a peer adversary. The current Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force – 10 (**CJSOTF-10**) offers such a model.

## THE SPECIAL ROLE OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS IN UKRAINE

U.S. and NATO special operations have entered the third phase of partnership with Ukraine. The first phase of "boots on the ground" from 2015 until early 2022 focused on developing and maturing Ukrainian professional soldiers. Heavily resourced by Western partners, Ukrainian special operations forces balanced training away from the frozen front in the east with operational execution along and behind Russian-backed lines. The proof of UKRSOF abilities came in the initial days of the war through their defense of **Hostomel** Airport and the northern route around **Chernihiv**. Both saved Kyiv, buying time for Ukrainian Armed Forces to maneuver against shocked Russian troops.

The second phase saw the gradual depletion of UKRSOF through attrition in the first year of the war. Their leading role in the initial Ukrainian counteroffensive, followed by close fighting along the front reduced their operational capacity by estimates of 90 percent. Despite the catastrophic **losses**, the net effect helped to save much of Ukraine from Russian occupation. The Western partnership during this phase was limited due to the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Ukraine. However, the U.S. European Command and subordinate U.S. Security Assistance and Special Operations commands rebuilt and expanded resupply networks from afar. The CJSOTF-10 facilitated those relationships through a vast network of liaisons that maintained the relationship with Ukrainian forces.

The current third phase of partnership works to broaden partnerships and strengthen Ukrainian capabilities to counter increasing Russian threats. CJSOTF-10 engages "up and out" relationships with US government and international partners in support of UKRSOF. Being embedded with Conventional units gives CJSOTF-10 farther reach into procurement and distribution along the front lines. Day-to-day activities reside with the subordinate Special Operations Task Force 10.1 (SOTF 10.1) overseeing training, equipping, advising, and assistance to Ukrainian Special Operations.

The SOTF 10.1 relies on three aspects of U.S. Special Operations to work within policy constraints preventing in-country engagement with Ukrainian forces. First, SOF doctrine prioritizes identifying centers of gravity capable of mobilizing larger groups. This gives SOF operators a force multiplying role through Irregular Warfare emphasis on populations. Second, SOF training enables teams to identify and quickly take advantage of opportunities to gain asymmetric advantage against adversaries through special reconnaissance and high value targeting. Third, the SOF network extends globally across government and commercial sectors, a hallmark of the SOF-Cyber-Space Triad in action. The combination has enabled SOTF 10.1 to reposition Ukrainian Special Operations Forces for a pivotal role once again.



The SOTF 10.1 oversees a “Remote, Advise, and Assist” (RAA) team that serves as a call center, library, and laboratory. While remote engagement does not permit shared risk, it does enable Ukrainian advances by 1) facilitating communications between units, 2) enhancing Ukrainian adaptation of existing capabilities, and 3) broadening partnerships with Western groups innovating battlefield technology across the Triad. Over the past year, the team has developed persistent communications with UKRSOF units all along the front lines. Using a range of systems, they help troubleshoot immediate tactical problems to improve operational effectiveness. Additionally, while shortages at the front are a constant reminder of Ukraine’s precarious position, SOTF 10.1 creates links for any unit – SOF or Conventional – to share resources, as well as resupply technical components from civilian sources.

Networks across governments and commercial entities also enable the RAA team to help Ukrainian messaging efforts beyond the front. Using a web of connections supported by the broader SOF community, Ukraine has improved the quality and quantity of messaging through multiple media outlets. Begun in earnest after 2014 to bolster domestic resilience and counter Russian **cyber capabilities**, current efforts focus heavily on external audiences to keep Western attention on Ukraine’s viability as a partner. The leading effort has been to increase online **English content** beyond **Kyiv Post** and **Ukrinform** as mainstays of information operations, thereby helping Ukraine compete in a crowded field of influence marketing.

Supporting this has been the inclusion of civilian foreign language translators during training exercises. Many are former public school **teachers** serving on short-term rotations. Cycling civilians through training bolsters domestic awareness of Ukraine’s military effectiveness. Doing so outside of Ukraine also enables SOTF 10.1 to rely on NATO partner expertise in vital skills including trench warfare, demolitions, sniper skills, and riverine maritime operations.

Regular adaptations to the programs of instruction incorporate emerging battlefield conditions. In particular, the RAA team facilitates adaptation and innovation in electronic warfare as it evolves in the war. Ukraine’s early efforts to bolster cyber defense have expanded to include a range of capabilities targeting enemy information nodes. Bridging civilian and Triad networks, SOF liaisons assist the development of rapid coding evolutions to identify gaps and exploit short-term vulnerabilities through the Special Operations “**find, fix, finish**” methodology.

In addition, much has been written about the growing ubiquity of unmanned aerial systems as essential elements for both sides. Yet while Russia’s initial performance was lower than expected, recent improvements in electronic warfare have meant increased risks to Ukrainian drones. The lack of abundant intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance resources means each drone

matters greatly to Ukraine’s success. **Crowd-source** funding has proliferated the number of drones, but it takes time to procure the necessary funds; even \$200 racing drones take weeks to source, to say nothing of actually producing and testing them. One-way-attack-drones have proven their worth taking out main battle tanks, electronic warfare platforms, command posts, and communication nodes, but they are not limitless. Russian jamming extends broader and deeper on both sides of the lines, leading to losses as well. Both sides actively capture and repurpose enemy drones, but Russia can afford the losses more readily than Ukraine.

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Therefore, the RAA team assists Ukrainian forces to find safe routes by passing along mission reports from other units along the line. As a central hub with real-time awareness, this supports Ukrainian mission success with accurate information of enemy capabilities. Increased battlefield awareness helps UKRSOF to find, fix, and finish targets, while also sharing lessons across the broader Conventional Armed Forces. Many of those lessons include technical advances in drone carrying capacity and flight time to increase range and lethality. Emerging research areas include munitions and **trauma care resupplies**, as well as expanding kinetic strikes against hardened targets.

While the drone arms race accelerates, SOTF 10.1 expands its partnerships with U.S. and European drone companies to help keep Ukraine at the cutting edge. As part of the SOF network

approach, the team relies on civilians with expertise in several key areas. Foremost are Ukrainian and Russian language experts. The former becomes more important as the country “de-Russifies” its common language; Ukrainian callers have already begun switching to [Ukrainian for communications](#) with the RAA call center. The second key area is commercial experience. A recent SOTF 10.1 team was a National Guard unit. Members included technology business owners, senior engineers, and computer scientists. Showcasing the critical importance of SOF-Cyber-Space integration, their expertise greatly facilitated accelerated advances in Ukrainian hardware and software capabilities. Deployments of U.S. Reservist subject matter experts would help to advance those efforts as well.

The combined effect of civilian involvement has led to greater trust of Western partners by Ukrainian units. SOTF 10.1 prioritizes feedback loops between advising, assisting and training that build on partner trust to improve the critical area of [mission command](#). Mission command means more than knowing how to plan operations. It requires using a range of [information sources](#) to exploit adversary weaknesses, and critically, enable follow-on missions by partnered forces. The decentralized leadership paradigm of special operations means UKRSOF pursue objectives rather than specific pathways to achieve them. Creative and critical thinking also enables units to assess results beyond battle damage, specifically identifying broader effects that support other types of operations. These can include psychological operations to increase Russian defections, strikes beyond the front lines, and increased testing of advanced weaponry. Recent efforts to improve long-range fires show the centrality of special operations as a network of specialists capable of resolving the most critical problems facing Ukraine.

## POSITIONING THE PARTNER TO WIN

High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and GPS-guided bombs have dominated the story of Ukraine’s war for independence. Their utility was witnessed throughout the war, destroying much of Russia’s initial combat power in the first year alone. They became more central to the partner war as U.S. stocks ran low and political will to resupply Ukraine even lower. While Congress debated financial support, Russian electronic warfare and surface-to-air missile systems were not idle. Improvements in equipment and deployment effectively negated the utility of GPS-guided bombs given the risks to Ukraine’s precious few aircraft. The HIMARS are also a costly weapon system compared to alternatives. Priced at over \$4.5 million each platform, and with lengthy manufacturing timelines, Ukraine cannot risk using, let alone losing a HIMARS system as happened earlier in 2024 nor have HIMARS always hit their targets, at times missing due to operator error, and at others from inaccurate coordinates for fire missions.

The SOTF 10.1 training has helped UKRSOF units increase precision writ large, but at a time of diminished stocks when senior Ukrainian commanders have been unwilling to use what they have left. Even standard 155mm artillery rounds have been rationed, with numerous fire missions going unheeded by higher headquarters. Combined with a predisposition for massed artillery as the sine qua non for offensive maneuvers, it is no wonder Ukrainian operations stalled for so long. As a result, prior to the Kursk incursion, calls for attrition warfare made sense when

viewed through the fixed paradigm of Soviet doctrine. However, SOTF 10.1 has begun to develop alternatives to work around those limitations through operational innovation from below.

As Russian defenses and electronic warfare signals penetrate deeper into “no-man’s land,” Ukraine [loses opportunities](#) to use existing drones for strikes. In response SOTF 10.1 has adapted training to enable UKRSOF to reach out farther from the front lines. This has included utilizing alternative munitions systems for longer range targets. Repurposing spent artillery shells and cluster munitions for multiple targets has added to Ukraine’s weapons stocks, but the real challenge has been overcoming line of sight targeting that exposes fire teams to Russian defenses. For example, Javelin missiles have comparable capacity to a single HIMARS rocket, and at a fraction of the cost compared to the overall system needed to fire the rocket.

Yet, with an effective range of only a few kilometers, Javelins have been limited to [intercepting advancing Russian armored units](#). They are much less successful forcing the Russians to move from fortified positions since Ukrainian teams cannot approach close enough to their targets and survive long enough to advance in force.

Technical solutions do exist though, as seen in the Israel-Hamas war. The Israeli [Spike](#) missile system incorporates a range of optics and [over the horizon targeting](#) to provide both mobility and stand-off options. Ukraine’s existing reconnaissance systems do not automatically match partner weapons platform though. However, as a clear example of the Triad in action, SOTF 10.1 is able to support Ukrainian problem solving to identify requirements, integrate systems, and develop prototypes for battle lab testing. Current operations have highlighted those evolutions.

Even with technical solutions though, Ukrainian military culture requires a fundamental change for the innovations to work and endure over time. During a previous engagement with SOTF 10.1, I spoke at length with UKRSOF group commanders about their requirements to win the war. Without hesitation, the consensus was “World War One artillery barrages followed by infantry charges from the trenches.” The collective ignorance of the failures inherent to the “cult of the offensive” was shocking. Even more so was the assertion that such tactics actually won the First World War.

Instead, Ukraine must adopt a “[Defense in Depth](#)” approach like the allies more than a century ago. Faints, harassing fire, and tactical withdrawals restore maneuver to the battlefield when combined with out-of-area assaults like Kursk. The aggregate uncertainty taxes Russia’s already insufficient command and control capabilities, to say nothing of straining the Kremlin’s [triumphalist propaganda](#) necessary for popular support of the war.

Yet despite the initial tactical gains in Kursk, the larger operational outcome hinges on Ukrainian combined arms maneuver. In that regard the earlier failure at Avdiivka was not tactical. Ukrainian soldiers fought against impossible odds, as UKRSOF units held positions until evacuation routes and casualty collection centers could be established behind their lines. The [barrage of artillery](#) – one Ukrainian round per 1200 Russian rounds – and human waves of Russian cannon fodder did not break the Ukrainians as they withdrew in good order, despite horrific casualties. The failure was operational because other Ukrainian Armed Forces did not exploit their own breaches



in the south, or place “stay behind” units to harass Russian advances while Avdiivka was being assaulted. U.S. and NATO SOF taught UKRSOF those skills, but the operational learning had not filtered upward.

Even with renewed U.S. funding for the war effort, Ukraine still needs to train a cadre of joint force staff officers capable of seeing the battlefield holistically and coordinating combined arms maneuver across the front. To meet the need, U.S. professional military education institutions should prioritize “**mobile education teams**” to teach mid-grade officers how to plan and execute large-scale, multi-domain operations. Previous discussions with UKRSOF company commanders have shown their willingness to adapt their operational paradigm if units could gain time away from the front and senior leaders buy into the approach.

Guided by ASD SO-LIC country prioritization and relying on various funding authorities, **mobile education teams** currently engage with NATO and other regional partners. Expanding those efforts to include a three-week “operational art” training module would meet the planning need, while allowing Ukrainian forces to maintain their “dwell time” ratios away from the front. Based on discussions with SOTF 10.1 and its instructional unit, Task Group Ukraine, an example course would include two weeks for mid-grade staff officers, followed by three days for senior commanders, concluding with a two-day Tabletop Exercise showing the integration of learning and practice. The National Defense University and Service Staff Colleges are replete with existing course materials, much of which can be augmented by the Joint Special Operations University and U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School to include SOF-specific material. This will enable Ukrainian armed forces to mature operationally in empirically grounded theory and doctrine of combined arms maneuver.

The SOTF 10.1 and Task Group Ukraine have already established programs of instruction that implement adaptive curriculum and “**train the trainers**” through iterations of courses. As part of the overarching SOF-Cyber-Space Triad approach, ongoing training events focus on integrating conventional and special operations, joint force coordination, electronic warfare, and drone utilization. A staff-level operational design course would enable tactical learning from below to filter upwards.

Education requires knowing what is needed to learn as much as time to learn it. Western assistance should prioritize SOF relationships that know the partner’s needs and can buy time beyond the immediate effects of the current Kursk offensive. Building staff capacity to plan, execute, and sustain combined arms maneuver should rely on UKRSOF to gain tactical mobility with over-the-horizon targeting as part of a larger Defense in Depth strategy. Doing so will help relieve immediate pressures on the frontlines by augmenting **anticipated resourcing of artillery munitions**. More importantly, it would stress Russian capabilities to manage the complexities of mobile warfare, something they have proven inept at accomplishing throughout the war.

With U.S. and NATO expertise supporting them across the operational spectrum, Ukrainian special operations forces are essential to implementing both the battlefield push and training pause to build a more capable force. Only then Ukraine can show the West the value of partnering over the long-term and, in so doing, help the country achieve lasting victory.

*The views expressed by this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Defense University, Department of Defense, or U.S. Government.*

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