Concepts, Practices, and Technologies of the Military Operation in Ukraine

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Abstract
The article analyzes the military-technological and conceptual characteristics of the Ukraine conflict, the largest armed confrontation in Europe since the Second World War. It examines the impact of modern technologies—primarily unmanned systems, network-centric control methods, high-precision weapons, and the digitalization of operations—on the nature of war. Special attention is paid to battlefield transparency, increased destructive power, improved defense capabilities, and the emerging positional impasse vaguely reminiscent of the tactical crisis observed during the First World War and subsequent armed conflicts. The article studies the relationship between technological innovations

and military concepts, the role of attrition warfare, strategic culture, mobilization resources, and military-economic resilience of the warring parties. It shows that the Ukraine conflict has become an important source of practical knowledge for modern military doctrines and force development, and concludes that the conflict will likely evolve under the combined influence of new technologies, organizational and mobilization adjustments, and strategic adaptation to the rapidly changing nature of warfare.

Keywords: modern warfare methods; unmanned systems; military adaptation; transparent battlefield; attrition warfare; tactical crisis; military technologies; strategic culture.

"The prospect of drone swarms annihilating entire armored, airborne, and amphibious formations, the ability for autonomous obstacles and surveillance to deny surprise, the potential for hypersonic missiles to target large headquarters and logistics hubs, and the miniaturization of electromagnetic-pulse and nuclear devices will challenge expeditionary campaigns. These advances, when coupled with decreased appetite for costly wars in Western democracies, will enable authoritarian defenses" (Jennings et al, 2018).

This statement, made in a 2018 article on contemporary U.S. expeditionary operations, is remarkably applicable to the current conflict in Ukraine. Indeed, the literature has already accumulated substantial theoretical knowledge about modern warfare: the growing importance of unmanned systems, the vulnerability of critical infrastructure, the profound shift in the balance between offensive and defensive capabilities. Yet these lessons are only beginning to be applied in military and political planning. Are we seeing, then, not a crisis of military science, but rather a lag in military practice? And to what extent is the 'Special Military Operation' actually *special*, rather than part of the general pattern of military and political history (Pukhov, 2024)?

A FRAMEWORK FOR SCIENTIFIC AND PRACTICAL INTEPRETATION OF THE UKRAINE CONFLICT

The conflict in Ukraine is Europe's largest since World War II. Its immense regional and global significance, along with its numerous new and distinctive features, make it particularly important for military theory and practice. Although practice is currently lagging behind theory, the trends emerging on the battlefields in Ukraine are likely to affect military planning worldwide.

Hostilities in the Gulf, in 2025 and 2026, saw both sides adapting technology and concepts from the Ukraine conflict: especially drones, used tactically on the battlefield and strategically against critical infrastructure.

Drone strikes on infrastructure had been tested even before the war in Ukraine, when the Houthis attacked Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure in 2019-2021, including strikes on Saudi Aramco facilities that temporarily disrupted refining and export. By demonstrating clustered energy facilities' vulnerability to low-cost unmanned vehicles, these strikes contributed to the strategic use of drones in subsequent conflicts, including in Ukraine. Later, the same methods, further developed in Ukraine, returned to the Middle East, especially in the improved production and use of Iranian Shahed/Geran drones.

While the academic and expert community considers the technological and conceptual aspects of the Ukraine war, their *interaction* is most important. For example, blitzkrieg in early World War II depended on technology (e.g., radio-equipped tanks), a decentralized command system (*Auftragstaktik*, the Germans' own version of NATO's 'mission command'), the integration of Luftwaffe and Wehrmacht operations, and improved systems of supply, command, and control.

Similarly, the current positional stalemate in eastern Ukraine, with its extended kill zones, is also the result of interplay between technological and conceptual factors: drones (military and commercial), satellites (e.g., Starlink) for surveillance and real-time targeting, and decentralized command systems and force structures.

The Ukrainian military-industrial complex is increasingly engaging small innovative firms and start-ups in drone production. Initially, the high adaptability of decentralized structures gave Ukraine a significant lead in the production and use of small drones. However, such structures have limited ability to conduct long-term R&D, and thus Russia eventually took the lead in a number of areas (e.g., fiber-optic FPV systems and strategic long-range drones). But Ukraine is again trying to pull ahead in the production and use of long-range tactical and even strategic drones.

Yet traditional and even archaic methods of warfare continue to play a significant role on the ground, including tube, rocket, and missile artillery, simple hand-held anti-tank and anti-personnel weapons, and even outdated anti-tank mines integrated with aerial and ground drones.

The evolution of military concepts and technology, at an annual or even quarterly rate, forces political goals, tactics, and strategies to evolve as well.

TECHNOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS

Although analogies are fraught with simplifications, comparative analysis remains an important tool of science, including military science. Since military history, like political history, often develops in an upward spiral, patterns observed in a particular historical period may partly or fully repeat themselves in the future, but at a higher technical level.

This war has already impacted the development of military technology, tactics, and strategy more strongly than any conventional conflict since 1945. There are a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, hostilities in Ukraine largely involve new technologies and methods—unlike, e.g., the Korean War and Arab-Israeli wars, which relied on WWII's legacy, and asymmetric U.S. and Soviet campaigns in Vietnam and Afghanistan, which also mostly repeated earlier historical experience.

Secondly, the Iraq, Panama, and Kosovo wars were fundamentally unequal in their belligerents' power and technology. But Russia and

Western-backed Ukraine are roughly equal in training, quality of equipment, and even—remarkably—the number of troops on the ground (Lieven, 2026).

Thirdly, the fighting in Ukraine has many characteristics that have surprised experts and are either novel or at least understudied until now, though some have analogies in previous military conflicts.

The first and perhaps most important analogy lies in the brief period of maneuver warfare in late February and early March 2022, followed by lengthy trench/positional warfare, like in World War I or the Iran-Iraq War. At the start of the war, Russia failed to gain the air supremacy needed to immediately achieve its goals. Then, in spring, its maneuver warfare failed to crush the Ukrainian army.

The transition to positional warfare is perhaps the greatest difference between the current Ukraine conflict and the various Middle Eastern operations of the U.S. and Israel. The transition was caused primarily by the increased power and accuracy of modern weapons, coupled with novel near-real-time reconnaissance, detection and targeting capabilities. Probably for the first time in history, neither side suffers from the 'fog of war'—tactically, operationally, and now even strategically. On the 'transparent battlefield,' it is difficult to achieve the strategic, operational, and even tactical surprise necessary for successful offensives, especially against prepared defensive lines.

Advancing troops are detected by aerial reconnaissance even as they gather and move towards the line of contact, and are attacked by tube artillery, missile systems, and drones (from FPV and kamikaze drones, to large ones with miniaturized guided weapons). Rocket and artillery fire has become even more important on the battlefield following its integration with modern surveillance and targeting systems. Initially, tube artillery and medium-caliber multiple launch rocket systems acted as key fires, with the quantity of guns and ammunition playing a decisive role. Russia—with its significant resources and traditional doctrine of suppressing the enemy through fires dominance—was advantaged by this situation. However, as small unmanned systems develop and spread, and their killing capacity and range increase, classical artillery is turning from the main means of

firepower into a priority target. This forces artillery units to constantly shoot and scoot, fire from greater distance, and gradually switch to self-propelled platforms. Artillery systems' survivability, mobility, and dispersion is becoming increasingly important. (Conversely, increased range of classical artillery is less useful, as kill zones come to extend for dozens of kilometers.)

The intensity of fire is now less important than its accuracy and integration with sensors. High-precision long-range tactical missile systems, mainly ground-based, are becoming especially important. Supported by modern surveillance and targeting capabilities, they can destroy top-priority targets, including mobile ones.

Although Russian aviation has never gained the ability to operate freely across Ukraine, guided bombs allow it to strike the enemy without entering into range of Ukrainian air defenses. Given the Russian air force's enduring quantitative and qualitative superiority over its Ukrainian adversary, this tactic has become one of the few factors significantly affecting the course of the war. Attack helicopters, on the other hand, have lost much of their effectiveness, given their vulnerability to interceptor drones and ground-based defenses.

Being under constant fire, both the advancing and the defending sides need decentralization and camouflage. Land forces are taking new, sometimes extravagant measures to protect armored vehicles, up-armoring them and providing them with active and passive countermeasures. But the vulnerability and immense losses of armored vehicles have prevented the belligerents from making large-scale active use of them on the front line.

As kill zones expand, logistics become a form of warfare in their own right. Fortifications, layered defenses, camouflage, protection of supply lines, and the resilience of above- and below-ground infrastructure are all increasingly important, both at the tactical and strategic levels, including for the creation of deeply layered defenses.

There is a renewed interest in passive defense methods, both traditional (e.g., concrete fortifications) and new (e.g., fixed and mobile systems of autonomous surveillance and fire, integrated into defensive lines). These methods are already being implemented by NATO's eastern

members, primarily Poland and the Baltic states, which are planning to strengthen their military infrastructure and construct multi-level defenses on their borders (Military Balance, 2026, pp.11-14).

TACTICAL CRISIS AND POSITIONAL STALEMATE

An attacker's inability to amass forces sufficient for breakthrough—known in the First World War as the 'tactical crisis' (Noorman, 2024)—was also observed at the beginning of the 20th century, particularly in the Anglo-Boer and Russo-Japanese wars. It renders defense superior to offense, forcing the belligerents to abandon maneuver for trench warfare.

Fighting in Ukraine is network-centric, allowing for the real-time command of small tactical units and groups. Yet attacking and penetrating defenses, under heavy fire and UAV visual control, requires decentralized command on the ground. This has given rise to special small assault groups, usually (but not always) well-armed and trained. These formations are analogous to the Kaiser's *Sturmtruppen* (soon replicated by other European armies), who specialized in breaking through layered defenses under heavy fire, and then holding the position while the regular infantry deployed (Lupfer, 1981).

The tactical crisis has deepened significantly over the four years of fighting in Ukraine, most clearly at the level of small frontline units. Drones have largely deprived them of heavy equipment and the ability to maneuver, and their serious losses and reduced effectiveness can cascade to the operational and even strategic levels. Increasingly often, multiple branches and detachments are engaged just to support the local advances of small assault groups.

On the transparent battlefield, a 30-35km kill zone extends from the front line in each direction, dominated by assault infantry and almost empty of armored vehicles.

Unmanned systems can now conduct strikes as well as reconnaissance. The war in Ukraine has spurred the development of ground and sea drones, the latter having been used at scale for the first time against the Russian Black Sea Fleet. In response, countries are introducing their own unmanned anti-aircraft and anti-drone systems (IISS Strategic Dossier, 2026).

And yet initial descriptions of drones' role in the Second Karabakh War, the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, and the start of the Ukraine conflict itself, were later found to be exaggerated (Plakoudas and Sofitis, 2023). Drones are not themselves a decisive factor, but a critically important element of new network-centric combat systems. The military situation in Ukraine is determined not only by the use of drones, but by the consistency and speed of data transmission and by the integration of reconnaissance and strike systems (Baluyevsky and Pukhov, 2026).

As exaggerated as certain accounts of drones may have been, the Second Karabakh War and recent Middle Eastern conflicts presaged much of what became reality in Ukraine after February 2022: no 'fog of war,' aerially-corrected fire significantly beyond the front line, small assault groups' infiltration of fortified defense lines, the combination of advanced precise weapons with traditional artillery, and drones as independent reconnaissance and strike forces (Davis, 2025-2026).

These conditions are now prompting revisions to decades- and even centuries-old force structures. Hierarchical models, including classical tertiary/quaternary schemes (e.g., three squads in a platoon, three platoons in a company, etc.), are gradually being replaced by more flexible decentralized organization, especially at the tactical level.

ATTRITION WARFARE AND THE FACTOR OF STRATEGIC CULTURE

In the summer of 2023, after the failure of Ukraine's Zaporozhye counteroffensive, a positional stalemate began, ushering in attrition warfare. (Though note that attrition warfare is not synonymous to positional warfare. With aerial firepower and deep strikes on infrastructure, it can be dynamic and to some extent involve maneuver.) Attrition warfare is not an anomaly, but one of the basic forms of armed confrontation: "attrition is how wars are won and lost more often than not" (Fox, 2025, p. 45).

Despite comparable conventional capabilities on the battlefield, the belligerents have fundamentally different resources available for long-term hostilities. Yet four years of intense fighting have not yielded any conceptual or technological means of effectively breaking the stalemate, and each new escalation leads to nothing but greater losses.

The emergence of a war of attrition has significantly increased the importance of strategic logistics, economic resilience, and socio-political stability—for both sides. These factors may ultimately be more decisive than military strategy or tactical art. This largely explains Russia's appointment, in May 2024, of Andrei Belousov—with a professional background in finance and public auditing—as defense minister.

Despite the dynamic development of military technologies, and conceptual-theoretical adaptations to them, states (and other actors) still tend to wage wars and respond to threats primarily within traditional models—i.e., given the political, geographical, cultural, social, historical, bureaucratic, and psychological factors that constitute countries' strategic culture.

Russia's war effort may have analogies in its earlier preparation, conduct, and eventual accomplishments (or lack thereof) in WWII, WWI, and the numerous European conflicts of the 18th-19th centuries (Miller, 2025).

Some of Ukraine's conduct also appears to echo the flexible and decentralized military organization of the Cossacks, as well as centuries-old experience of resilience, irregular warfare (e.g., Zaporozhian Cossacks challenged the authority of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Crimean Khanate throughout the 16th-18th centuries,) and civil resistance (specifically in the 1940s-1950s). This creates an institutional and cultural basis for adaptive warfare, with high tactical autonomy and social mobilization and self-organization in the face of a superior adversary.

Importantly, even after four years of tactical crisis and three years of attrition, it remains possible that the adoption of new weapons (especially guided and autonomous ones) or new concepts will partly return the fighting to a war of maneuver or something else entirely.

GOALS AND STRATEGIES OF THE CONFLICTING PARTIES

As hostilities developed, Ukraine (and its EU and U.S. backers) acted based on the assumption that Russia could be strategically defeated in a protracted conflict by using high-tech weapons and imposing large-scale economic sanctions. This, in turn, assumed that the

Russian socio-political system and economy were highly vulnerable to external pressure and could be destabilized and overthrown. The plan was essentially to repeat the systemic crisis and revolution of 1917, but in present-day conditions. In another sense, it is a repeat of Cold War *containment*, when the U.S. and NATO sought the USSR's gradual political, military, economic, and technological strangulation (Gaddis, 2005).

In some respects, such hopes look reasonable: the West has an absolute advantage in economic, financial, and technological resources. Yet one must also consider Russia's accelerating military-economic mobilization, its significant military reserves, and its more centralized, personalized, and efficient management system and decision-making process. The West, meanwhile, is still contemplating the desirability of militarizing its own economy and the effectiveness of trying to strategically strangle Russia. This places in doubt the relevance of 'strategic depth'—something that has been Russia's main advantage for centuries, especially in large and lengthy wars.

In addition to its own war production, Russia also imports large amounts of dual-use technologies and products from China and other countries, particularly commercial drones, which make up a significant part of the UAV arsenals of both Russia and Ukraine. The resources and technology of China and other non-Western actors have significantly reduced the effectiveness of Western containment. Containment worked well in the bipolar system, but functions poorly outside of the historical context that birthed it (Gaddis, 2005, p. 380).

WWII showed that in a long-term war, the side that makes more (albeit simpler) weapons has an advantage. Similarly, in Ukraine, the key to the arms race was initially the standard 155-mm artillery shell, of which millions were needed, not the high-tech precision Excalibur guided shell of the same caliber. The same principle can be confidently extrapolated to drones, long-range missiles, and even AI-equipped systems, especially given the integration of civilian technologies that often make mass production much cheaper.

Yet Russia's main advantage is not its (so far) enduring quantitative superiority in *materiel*. Even with the mass introduction of new

technology like drones, the conflict is primarily a ground war, in which infantry—especially well-trained and motivated—remains especially important. And Russia's mobilization reserve is greater than Ukraine's. The latter has already carried out several waves of mobilization, and further call-ups could trigger a socio-political crisis.

Russia has so far confined itself to just one partial mobilization, in the fall of 2022, and subsequently made up for combat losses mainly by massively recruiting contract soldiers and reservists. In addition, until the summer of 2023, Wagner PMC—largely staffed by convicts—was a major participant in the Donbass's bloody battles. Even the brief but noticeable appearance of North Korean troops in the Kursk region in 2024-2025, tipped the balance in Russia's favor at that critical stage of hostilities.

In other words, the Russian leadership's main assumption is that Ukraine will run out of manpower before its allies can grant it material-technological superiority.

Unmanned systems can partly compensate for Ukraine's manpower shortages. But this is hardly possible without large-scale drone supplies, despite the creation of a 'drone wall,' especially if Western military-technical assistance declines (Clavilier, 2026). However, at the current level of development, replacing humans with drones will have a limited effect. Despite their ease of production, low cost, increasing autonomy, and integration with other technologies (like 3D printing), drones cannot fully replace people, even at the tactical level, in defense, offense, or command. The Ukraine conflict has revealed the limits of the technologization of war: even with military operations highly automated and digitalized, the human factor is still key at both the tactical and strategic levels (Fox, 2026).

Naturally, the situation on the ground may change dramatically again, as has already happened more than once before. Ukraine still has sufficient mobilization potential to last for a long time, despite heavy combat losses and migration outflow. Both sides have demonstrated great military, political, and economic resilience, and an ability to endure enormous human, material, and political losses. Both armies have been able to adapt both technologically and conceptually.

To break the positional impasse, both sides are now striking critical infrastructure targets deep inside each other's territory, increasing the economic and political losses in the war of attrition. This resembles the "war of the cities" between Iran and Iraq, or the air raids and artillery bombardment of capitals in WWI. In both cases, belligerents trapped in positional warfare sought to undermine each other's morale and political will. But coercion through strategic bombing is never very effective. Only severe battlefield defeat or losses can seriously demoralize a party or deprive it of the ability to continue fighting (Pape, 1996, pp. 24-26). Yet Russia and Ukraine are both expanding their abilities to strike deep behind enemy lines, using their specific capabilities and advantages.

To damage Ukraine's economy and energy grid, destabilize its transport and infrastructure networks, and thereby weaken society's will to resist, Russia uses sea-, land-, and air-launched drones, as well as cruise and ballistic missiles.

Initially, Ukraine's strikes were carried out mainly with relatively simple drones, but Ukraine has since greatly developed its drones and missiles, and it can now reach up to thousands of kilometers inside Russia, targeting sensitive energy and infrastructure facilities, with both military effect and media resonance.

Ukraine is also trying to increase Russia's political and reputational costs by striking sensitive targets, including elements of the strategic nuclear deterrence system (strategic airfields, early warning radars) and symbolically significant infrastructure such as the Crimean Bridge.

Such operations of military-political pressure have a mainly coercive rather than military purpose. Ukraine's Kursk operation, for instance, was primarily intended to undermine the Russian leadership and weaken its will to continue the war. But such operations do not work across the board and cannot compare in scale and outcome of conventional war.

At present, Ukraine's campaign against Russia's rear air defenses—utilizing long-range drones, cruise missiles, and precision-guided munitions of its own design—seems to be striking a particularly sensitive point.

Unlike Ukraine and Western countries, Russia's strategy in the war is military more than political. Moscow is counting not so much on Ukraine's political and economic destabilization, or on the end of Western support, but rather on the Ukrainian military's exhaustion and collapse under the pressure of heavy losses—to be followed by political fallout.

This approach of 'sustainable attrition' is comparable to the strategies employed by U.S. General Ulysses Grant during the American Civil War or by British Field Marshal Douglas Haig during WWI. This strategy seeks the Clausewitzian *climax* of the war, after which the depletion of the enemy's resources and resilience leads to the disorganization of his forces and/or demoralization of his leadership.

Russian experts sometimes cite the 'Brusilov breakthrough' as an operation that was intended to break a positional stalemate. It involves several simultaneous attacks along various axes to gradually breach the enemy's layered defenses and force it to disperse its limited resources. As long as the Russian army retains the initiative and continues to advance, such an approach forces Ukraine to spread out its resources and deploy limited reserves to several sectors of the front at the same time. For example, Russia opened a new front in northern Kharkov region in May 2024, expanded operations in northern Sumy region after the end of it's Kursk counteroffensive in the spring of 2025, and took similar actions in other sectors of the front in order to divert Ukrainian reserves. This amounts to exhausting the enemy through distributed strikes, or 'a thousand cuts.'

For its part, during stubborn defensive battles, the Ukrainian army often holds fortified strongpoints and settlements, operating in partial or almost complete encirclement with layered and elastic defense-in-depth. This involves intentional tactical territorial concessions in order to preserve the combat efficiency of the troops, wear out the enemy, and subsequently restore defensive stability across operational depth. Its logic can be traced to Germany's strategies at the end of World War I and on the Eastern Front of World War II, where mobile defense, operational depth, flexible control, and persistent counterattacks compensated for the enemy's local superiority (Wray, 1986).

Although this article does not consider the probability or consequences of a nuclear scenario, the war has significantly rewritten the theory and practice of nuclear deterrence. While still applicable, strategic deterrence manifests itself in a different, less predictable and canonical form than was conceived by the leading nuclear powers. Both Russia and the West are already discussing the continued development and possible use of nuclear weapons, their integration with high-precision delivery systems, and the consequences for global strategic stability. Academic studies are considering points (e.g., in the fall of 2022) at which nuclear weapons might have been used in the war (Kuh, 2025).

Countries are adjusting their military doctrines and revising their 'nuclear thresholds.' Russia has already changed its nuclear doctrine. France has proposed forward (but still temporary and 'dispersed') deterrence for the EU. Other world powers, like China, are rethinking future conflicts as likely to be full-scale wars of attrition (Kashin et al, 2026).

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The Ukraine conflict's routinization—at first mainly by Russia (in a manner remotely reminiscent of its almost endless 18th-19th century Caucasian War), now also by Ukraine—reflects its now protracted nature. Governmental and social institutions have adapted to a long confrontation, which has evolved from a war of attrition into a 'war of endurance' (Kofman, 2026).

Conceptually, after four years, the conflict demonstrates a tactical crisis, as defensive and positional warfare dominates maneuver, and a grueling war of attrition prevails on the transparent battlefield. Yet the war could return to greater fluidity, or take on some other form entirely, given the introduction and combination of new weapons, technologies, and ideas.

The Russian and Ukrainian armies are acquiring unique experience in modern warfare, based on the combined use of high-tech and traditional weapons in Europe's largest conflict since WWII. Russia continues to demonstrate persistent force regeneration ability, while

undertaking the long-term transformation of its military. Regardless of outcome, the Russian army will have gained significant experience in new-generation large-scale war. As for Ukraine, if its state institutions remain stable, it will become a more militarized country with unique combat experience, trained personnel, and a developed military and strategic culture. Ukraine may spread decentralized military practices and form a 'war society' characteristic of countries involved in long-term high-intensity conflicts. But the Ukrainian state could also undergo a deeper socio-political reconfiguration, given the qualitatively different technological context and the changed nature of war.

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