



EXECUTIVE POLICY BRIEF

Comparative Analysis of Ways of War in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Lessons for the Philippines

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INTRODUCTION

Popular defense discourse on the Russian invasion of Ukraine tends to revolve around geopolitical debates on the rationales of the war, the tactical successes and failures of the combatants, and technical discussions about the (in)efficacy of Russian and Western weapon systems as they see combat. Closer to the Philippines, the discourses around the war largely revolve around its effect on regional flashpoints¹ and Philippines foreign relations with specific countries and blocs.

Ways of war can mean many things: Lawrence Sondhaus, in his review of the literature on strategic culture and ways of war, noted that key thinkers such as BH Liddell-Hart and Russell Weigley often discussed “national ways of war” as a particular country’s approach or style in fighting wars,² noting that such ways of war could be conceived as either a subset or a product of a particular country’s strategic culture. Antulio Echevarria II defines “way of war” as “general trends in the conduct of, and preferred modes of thinking about war.”³ Drawing on these definitions, this policy brief will discuss the ways of war of Russia on one hand, and Ukraine on the other, specifically looking at their strategic culture and expressions of operational art.

Specially, the paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What are the key features of the Russian and Ukrainian ways of war?

- To what extent are these features products of training and/or experience?
- What strategic-operational lessons may be learned from the interactions of these approaches which can be applicable to countries like the Philippines?

The hostilities between Russia and Ukraine is widely seen as a testbed for modern warfare, even before the 24 February 2022 invasion.⁴ Even as the war unfolds, many lessons can be drawn from this conflict that can be used to help others prepare for the threats they likewise need to face.

This paper will first examine the basics of the Russian ways of war by looking at its strategic culture, grand strategy, and how its operational art supports this strategy. Next, the paper will briefly analyze Ukraine’s strategic culture and how its ways of war evolved since independence and just before the 24 February 2022 invasion. The paper will then touch on how the experience of war has affected the combatants’ ways of war and concludes with some policy lessons that can be applied to the Philippines and perhaps other strategic contexts.

In writing this brief, the author acknowledges certain limitations. Due to the geographic distance of the subject matter, research is largely through third-party, mostly English-language sources, though effort has been made to find Russian and Ukrainian literature and sources. While due diligence has been applied, it is expected that certain nuances may be lost in translation. It is hoped that this may be remedied in follow-on works.

MAJOR CASE ISSUES

RUSSIA

RUSSIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE

The Russian choice to launch the 24 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine across multiple directions, with the aim of “demilitarization and denazification”⁵ represented the most recent and forceful attempt by Russia to reassert what it traditionally saw as its “sphere of influence”, focusing on majority-Orthodox states that were once part of the Soviet Union, and before that, the Russian Empire.⁶ While using force to achieve objectives is not unique to Russia by any means, the 2022 invasion follows a pattern of using force to achieve objectives in Russia’s near abroad, such as the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas that preceded 2022, and the 2008 Russo-Georgia War.

Russia perceives this “sphere of interest” to be threatened by the West, specifically the United States and the European Union. Such threats are not limited to direct military aggression or threats to internationally recognized Russian territory. Russian strategic culture, even pre-Soviet times, saw all problems and issues as interconnected,⁷ which was only reinforced during the Soviet times, and remains today. This culture helps to explain why Russia today perceives threats to its status as a great power, which includes spheres of influence and special rights towards its neighbors, which is disrupted when countries that should “naturally” gravitate to Russia are lured away by American and European economic, political, cultural and military power.⁸ It is in this context that Russia’s actions in Ukraine should be understood.

Such holistic threat perceptions are not a new concept to Russia; ever since the Cold War ideological, political and

economic threats have concerned Soviet strategic leadership, almost, if not just as much, as direct military threats from the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In particular, the then-Soviet Union had taken great pains to ensure that while they would be free to conduct “active measures” (*aktivnyye meropriyatiya/активные мероприятия*) or subversive political and ideological activities against Western countries, they would insulate themselves from Western efforts to conduct the same within the borders of the then-Soviet Union.⁹

RUSSIAN STRATEGY

Russian strategy has been the subject of frequent academic discussion since the Cold War, as the United States and the West in general sought to understand the plans and intentions of the then-Soviet Union and today’s Russia. While modern Russia’s strategies have evolved with the current security environment, as mentioned in the preceding section they are still heavily influenced by the strategic culture it inherited from the Soviet times.

Modern Russian strategy is best described as cross-domain coercion (*mezhdomennoye prinuzhdeniye/междоменное принуждение*). Cross-domain coercion is often associated with the term “hybrid warfare”, which uses methods apart from military action to achieve objectives while stymieing responses from the target country and the international community. Cross-domain coercion emphasizes use of all elements of national power to coerce and compel a country or group of countries, in this case Ukraine and its partners in the West, towards accepting Russian positions and demands.

In cross-domain coercion, there are no real taboos to what kind of instruments

are permissible to achieve the desired effects. Nuclear weapons, direct and indirect military actions, economic coercion, information warfare and disinformation, and even cultural posturing and identity conflicts are all valid tools.

Russian cross-domain coercion as a strategy is often used as evidence by critics and observers of Russia's intent to actively dismantle and supplant the rules-based international order (R BIO) with a world order that guarantees Russian domination in its rightful sphere of interest. It should also be noted however that in the Russian view, this strategy is still defensive in intent and appropriate as Russia itself faces hybrid threats of its own, in keeping with the interconnected nature of all problems as espoused in Russian strategic culture. In the 2014 Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, Russia identifies "establishment of regimes that threaten Russian interests", "undermining historical, spiritual and patriotic traditions related to the defense of the motherland" as among the threats that Russia faces.¹⁰

RUSSIAN OPERATIONAL ART

Another component of the Russian way to war is operational art (*operativnoe iskusstvo*/оперативное искусство). In the Russian/Soviet sense, it is the "careful sequencing and synchronization required to break through multiple defensive belts" in the context of large and complex operations to achieve specific political aims. While operational art supports the military instrument of cross-domain coercion, it concerns itself purely on military effectiveness; leaving other instruments of cross-domain coercion to be wielded at strategic/national leadership levels.¹¹ Russian Operational art as envisioned by

the Soviets and later Russians emphasized the inseparability of strategy and politics, as evidenced in this quote from Soviet military theorist Alexander Svechin:

"Strategy is the art of combining preparations for war with the grouping of operations to attain the objective that the war sets for the armed forces. Strategy resolves questions relating to the use of the armed forces and of all the country's resources to achieve the ultimate objective of the war."¹²

The development of operational art was made necessary by the experiences of the Soviet Union immediately after its founding, as well as recent war experience in World War I. It was recognized even in the 1920s that the evolving state of the art of warfare even then required dealing with complicating factors, such that conducting a large operation produces problems that cannot just be solved by concrete plans but also required strong theoretical foundations.¹³

This need for strong theoretical foundations reflects the fact that the Russian way of war emphasized scientific organization, beginning in the Soviet period.¹⁴ This is reinforced by the Russian use of military nomograms – graphical calculators using prescribed mathematical formulae for assessing correlation of forces and means (COFM) that include quantitative estimations of factors such as expected fuel, food, and ammunition consumption rates, radii of destruction of weapons according to class and caliber, among others. Thus calculated, expected COFMs would inform commanders' decision-making as COFMs would be matched to the appropriate tactics and courses of action. Such a style of decision-

making makes sense in the Russian context, as it simplifies and thus speeds up decisions, which contributes to faster response and improved chances of success. It also reduces the variance of skills from commanders; as even otherwise unremarkable or mediocre commanders can simply calculate and decide based on the COFMs they derive.

UKRAINE

UKRAINIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE

The development of modern Ukrainian strategic culture is a consequence of its history following independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. If Russian strategic culture takes a holistic, interconnected view to its problems in order to identify how best to preserve its status as a great power especially with respect to neighbors such as Ukraine as well as asserting itself in its near-abroad, Ukrainian strategic culture is defined by resistance to coercive cultural integration and willingness to preserve state sovereignty as the highest priority.¹⁵ Given such priorities, it is perhaps unsurprising that Ukraine is willing to consider radical policies to protect itself, even at considerable cost, most demonstrated by the scale of resistance Ukraine has mustered to the Russian invasion.

At the same time, it seeks to minimize threats up to a certain point, rather than necessarily resorting to direct confrontation. This behavior is due to considerations of image and norms, as the state wishes to preserve the image and reputation of Ukraine as a state that follows international norms. Thus, Ukraine is unlikely to consider first-strike strategies or other extremist methods. This was seen both in the lead-up to invasion, where, perhaps unwisely, Ukraine did not immediately mobilize its

forces to prevent itself from being seen as an aggressor, and after the invasion, where Ukraine swiftly used international and multilateral platforms to promote its cause, garner sympathy and gain allies and assistance.¹⁶

UKRAINIAN STRATEGY

In 2014, it was judged that Ukraine had little if any strategy,¹⁷ which, combined with the politics of the time meant that they were unable to quickly respond to the annexation of Crimea or the initial moves of separatist forces in the Donbas. To compensate, Ukraine began to rely on volunteer groups and privately-funded militias.¹⁸ Following the increasing involvement of Russian military forces that led eventually to the Minsk I and II agreements in late 2015, the conflict continued, albeit at a reduced and sporadic pace. Reforms were slow to start, even at the beginning of the current Zelensky administration, but gradually began to pick up pace. Following the 2022 invasion, Ukraine has begun developing its own national doctrine; while its final form is yet to be determined, it is very much influenced by the ongoing war as well as the imperatives of reform, and the tension between wanting to be part of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture yet achieving a measure of self-reliance and resilience ability to sustain what may well be a long conflict, as well as transitioning to a fully professional, volunteer force.¹⁹

UKRAINIAN OPERATIONAL ART

The above-mentioned desire to internationalize combined with its relative weaknesses have led Ukraine to eagerly receive training and security assistance from NATO as part of the Defense Education and Enhancement Program (DEEP), from 2014 onward after the seizure of Crimea and the beginning of the War in Donbas.²⁰ Capacity building focused on basic training, train-the-

trainer courses, and the development of a professional non-commissioned officer (NCO) career system and professional military education (PME) for NCOs.

It should be noted that much of this aid prior to 2022 was in support of capacitating Ukraine for unconventional guerilla warfare under the Resistance Operating Concept.²¹ This concept emphasized building national resistance capacity in event of an invasion by an aggressor, rather than preparing Ukraine for striking first, or fighting larger-scale operations, which coincidentally was one of the Russian justifications for its invasion. This is evident in the focus on small-unit tactics, as well as the principle of mission command, wherein operational and tactical objectives are given to units that then operate in a decentralized manner, giving unit commanders the initiative to accomplish the mission in the best way given facts on the ground.

Given the size of the Ukrainian armed forces even pre-24 February, it was inevitable that such training would not be available for all personnel. Thus, personnel trained in the Western methods were disseminated across the regular forces and even to the Territorial Defense Forces.

COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT

When the invasion began, it was generally assumed that Russia would prevail quickly, due to the significant numerical and materiel mismatch between the two forces, to the point that Ukrainian resistance or even American aid for such resistance was deemed irrelevant.²² Subsequent events have proved this to not be the case, with several major Russian advances in Kyiv, Kherson and Kharkiv being reversed by

September-October 2022. Following a Russian advance on Bakhmut that lasted for much of the first half of 2023, Ukraine is currently proceeding with a counteroffensive focused on its southern borders as well as continued fighting in the Donbas.

The declaration of President Putin on 24 February 2022, as well as articulated his essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* published in 2021, indicated that the war aims for Ukraine were maximalist, aiming at either regime change, partial to full annexation of Ukraine. However, commentators quickly noted that in terms of manpower, the available personnel for the operation, initially assessed at 180,000 including paramilitary elements, were insufficient for the occupation of a country of around 30-40 million people. Given the observed scope and scale of resistance by Ukrainians, it was soon apparent that Russian forces would face major difficulties even if they were able to capture most of the territories of Ukraine. As the Russian operational approach, being based on nomograms, required accurate data of both the capabilities of Russian forces as well as those of Ukraine, it is a reasonable assessment that key assumptions and intelligence were lacking.

While the performance of Russian troops was heavily disparaged on social media and stereotyped as unthinking forces, the war also showed that they were indeed capable of improvisation, adaptability and self-mobilization on an individual level.²³ Further, there have been tactical and operational-level adaptations such as changes in employment of key combat support systems, particularly in more defensive applications to hold their captured territory.²⁴

It is possible that the poor performance was less due to any stereotypes about Russians, and more lack of practice due to the nature of conscript forces, where conscripts rotate out of the service after a year of duty, which makes institutional memory and practice difficult. While the recent mobilizations and stop-loss initiatives should ideally ensure more manpower and retained experience, it remains to be seen if this will lead to improved offensive prowess; the expensive battles for Bakhmut and Vuhledar in the first half of 2023 as well as the multiple repulsed attacks observed in an October 2023 offensive in Avdiivka²⁵ do not bode well, but may be due to factors beyond just the tactical or operational level.

On the Ukrainian side, the war showed the success of small-unit operations when it came to defending static positions and conducting mobile defense of areas.²⁶ However, the war also showed the difficulties of distributing knowledge across large forces, as the wartime expansion of Ukraine's armies via volunteers and conscription meant that many units would not receive Western mission command style training.

Small unit success also does not necessarily translate to being better able to conduct large scale maneuvers quickly. As predicted by the Soviet pioneers of operational art such as Isserson and Svechin, large scale maneuvers with their complexity would be very difficult affairs, which combine with the emerging technologies and higher firepower of modern weapons to create very steep learning curves for success. The Ukrainians seem aware of this, following initial setbacks on using larger forces they have since reverted to pushing using smaller units, partly to capitalize on their strength at that level, and partly to reduce loss rates to more manageable levels,²⁷ which indicates

reasonable adaptability and willingness to alter methods after setbacks.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The interaction between Russia and Ukraine's militaries show the challenges that their respective ways of war face on the modern battlefield. For countries like the Philippines that face their own threats and challenges, the war provides many data points for consideration in developing their current and future forces. Much literature has already been made on the lessons regarding particular types of weapons systems, tactics and strategies, which are best discussed elsewhere. This brief offers the following additional considerations:

Enhancing capacity to absorb learnings from and generating insights from military operations.

The war in Ukraine has shown both sides the need of armed forces to be learning organizations. A key element to achieve this is the ability to properly digest lessons and experiences and disseminate said learnings to as many levels as practicable. The last combat operation that even approximates the experience of the Russia-Ukraine war was the six-month Marawi siege from May to October 2017, and while lessons there were drawn, the context and circumstance featured a different type of enemy and conflict.²⁸ As the Department of National Defense (DND) and Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) continue their transition to external defense, no less than Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro has said that there is a need to build up "interdisciplinary inputs in order to analyze threats" and be able to process data usefully, in order to contribute to strategy.²⁹

Move beyond signalling and maximizing use of data from military exercises.

The AFP conducts regular large-scale training, both unilaterally via exercises such as *Dagat-Langit-Lupa* (DAGIT-PA) and *Kalasag*, and exercises with its treaty ally and like-minded partners such as the RP-US *Balikatan* Exercises and Philippines-Australia Exercise *Alon* geared towards a variety of missions, including preparing for external defense against nation-state aggressors. The conduct of such exercises not only provides good experience for troops, they also signal resolve both of the Philippines and partners. Beyond these purposes, these exercises can and should also be seen to provide data that can be used to refine operational and possibly even higher strategy, without the cost of a real war. Digesting these lessons should not just be done via after-activity reports but actively incorporating data into strategic research in support of crafting strategy. This can be done via expanding the involvement of relevant units (e.g. the Office for Strategic Studies and Strategy Management, the AFP History and Lessons Learned Center, the Office for Naval Strategic Studies and Strategy Management, among others) in military exercises, and improving said units' access to data.

Enhancing a secure knowledge management system to increase organizational learning, and collaboration.

Related to the above recommendation, such units should be encouraged and supported to publish their findings for wider dissemination, if not organically possible due to resource constraints or other limitations, then via appropriate platforms such as those provided by the National Defense College of the Philippines such as the National Security Review and the Future of Philippine Warfare Project. While there

are understandable security concerns with regard to data classification, these concerns can be mitigated with proper knowledge management, including consultations and data sanitation as appropriate.

Improving preparations for attritional warfare in contingency planning.

Russia and Ukraine's experience has shown that wars could quickly become prolonged affairs despite expectations of quick success and the proliferation of new technologies. The Philippines itself experienced this with the Marawi Siege of 2017 which lasted for six months. The DND and other relevant agencies such as the Department of Energy and Department of Agriculture should prepare contingency stocks of arms, spare parts, and strategic resources such as fuel, lubricants and food for a long conflict (or other strategic emergency).³⁰

CONCLUSION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was not just a testbed for modern warfare, but it also provided an opportunity to contrast opposing strategic cultures and ways of war. Despite their unique histories and circumstances, both the Russian and Ukrainian ways of war are evolving to keep up with their opposite numbers and adapt to an increasingly sophisticated and dangerous battlefield. It reinforces the importance of modernization and adaptation for forces and states like the Philippines, who face their own perilous strategic situations with far larger forces. Modernization therefore should not just be about enhancing and increasing force capabilities and acquiring platforms - though this absolutely must proceed - but perhaps also reassessing and reevaluating the country's strategic culture.

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	Russia	Ukraine
Strategic culture	Imperative to preserve Russia's "strategic space"/sphere of influence ¹ See threats from political-cultural-economic as well as military force ²	Imperative to preserve independence and identity Consider reputation of Ukraine to international community
General strategy	Cross-domain coercion towards target and its partners	None initially, moving towards strategic resilience in partnership with allies
Operational art	Scientific organization, relies primarily on nomograms	Mission command with complex planning

Table 1
A comparison of Russia's and Ukraine's respective ways of war

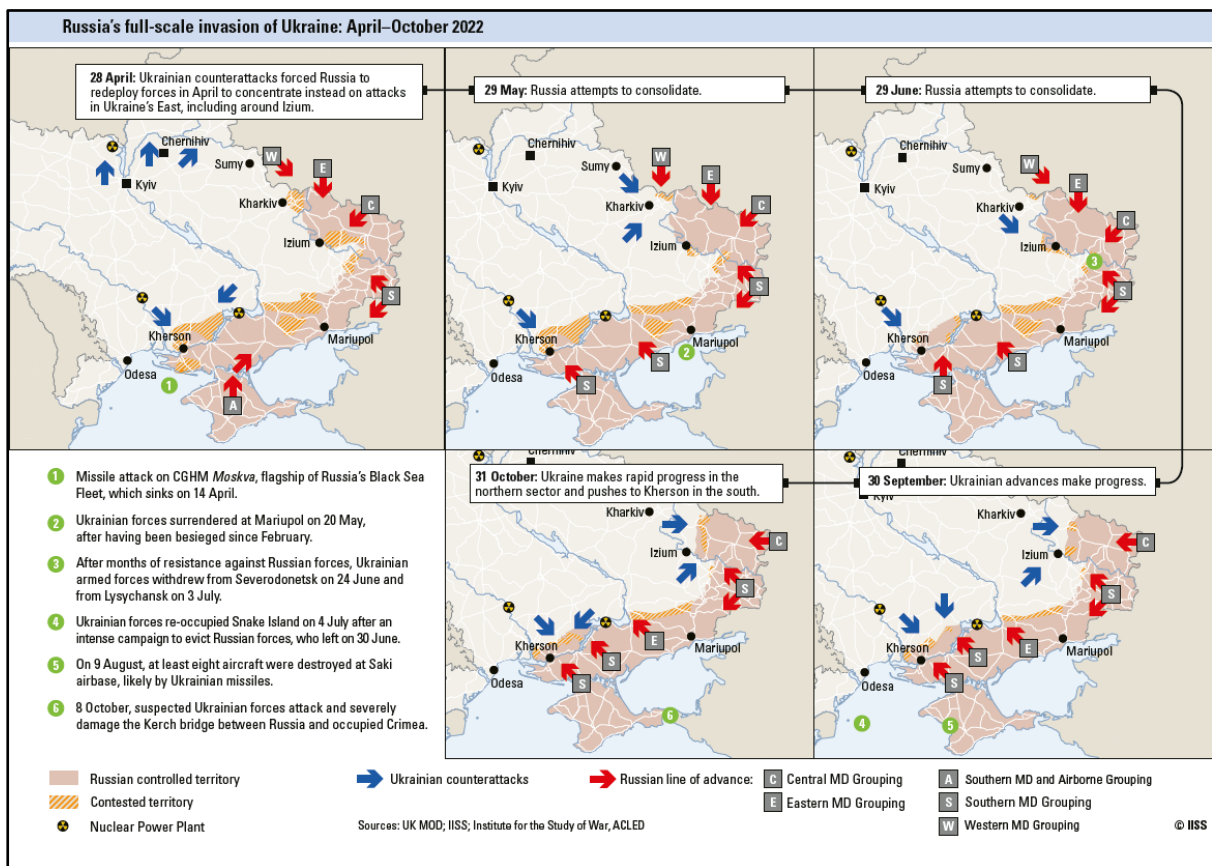


Figure 1
Map of the War from April to October 2022, demonstrating scale of the conflict
Source: IISS 2023³

¹ Mankoff, "Constructing Russia's Strategic Space"

² Russian Federation, "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation"

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NDCP Executive Policy Brief

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