

Seven Contemporary Insights on the State of the Ukraine War

By Mick Ryan

Introduction

The war in Ukraine remains a rapidly evolving conflict. The battlefield, strategic strike, information operations, and industrial production campaigns remain crucial to both Ukraine's and Russia's war efforts. In all of these endeavors, there is an ongoing adaptation spiral occurring that is spinning out innovative techniques and technologies. At the same time, this is providing insights for Western strategists and force structure planners.

This white paper provides contemporary insights into the war and offers assessments on what they mean for possible conflict trajectories in the coming months. These insights are based on the author's multiple visits to Ukraine, including one in October 2025. The seven key findings offer external observers not only an update on this rapidly changing war, but a view from the ground into how the character of war itself is evolving.

1. Drone Issues: Saturation and Russian Evolution

The eastern front line continues to be saturated with drones. As a result, within 15 kilometers (km) of the front line, **vehicle movement is difficult** to impossible. Infantry soldiers must instead march to their positions for 10-15 km.¹ Where armored vehicles and artillery are deployed, they can be subject to dozens of attacks per platform per day.² Ukraine has invested in decoys and deception activities, and headquarters are being built **deep underground**. The question is whether this saturated environment, which has built in scale and intensity over the last three and a half years, is possible elsewhere (e.g., the

1. Author interview with Ukrainian military personnel in October 2025.

2. Ibid.

noncontiguous Pacific theatre). If so, how quickly might combatants build the kind of drone deployment seen in Ukraine?

Despite the heavy use of drones, infantry troops remain more important than ever to hold ground. And despite their growing proficiency with drones, infantry remain essential to Russian operations to seize terrain. It does so in **small teams** of between two and four soldiers, and sometimes, with single individuals covered with thermal blankets. An indication of how essential infantry troops remain can be found in the **organization** of Ukraine's combat brigades. While nearly every Ukrainian brigade has one to two drone battalions, they all retain three to five infantry battalions as well.

This drone saturation is mainly occurring in the air. Despite the huge efforts to develop and deploy uncrewed ground combat vehicles, some interlocutors have indicated that these have been less successful in combat units than hoped for.³ The exception to this is forward resupply and casualty evacuation. At sea, Ukraine is deploying a **new generation of naval drones**, although the country has already generated significant success in the eastern region of the Black Sea by reopening Western sea trade routes and keeping key ports open.

Russian innovation in drones probably now just outstrips that of Ukraine, according to frontline combat leaders.⁴ The slight Russian lead has several contributing factors: First, Russia was a first mover with fiber-optic controlled drones and continues to lead in their development and employment. These provide a stealthier platform and superior continuous high-definition imagery for targeting. Second, Russia has **standardized** its drone production around a limited number of models, whereas Ukraine employs dozens if not **hundreds** of different models. This has logistics, training, and production implications. Finally, the Russian Rubicon units have **transformed** Russian drone operations and the targeting of Ukrainian drone control centers. Russian procedures have been standardized, and the sharing of lessons between Russian drone units has improved. Rubicon units are able to innovate with their tactics quickly. Russia sees drone control centers as the Ukrainian tactical center of gravity, and therefore, these are now the Russian tactical focus.⁵

2. The New Battle Triangle

Despite the findings of the above section, Ukraine is not a drone war, it is a war where drones have gained prominence. In Ukraine and elsewhere, drones do not replace human capacity—they extend it. Neither have they replaced artillery, tanks, infantry, engineers, or logisticians in Ukraine—they have complemented them.⁶ The Ukrainians view drone operations as improving existing conventional systems, changing how they are used, and covering gaps in conventional capacity, but not replacing them. They also talk of a new battle triangle with intelligence, operations, and drones and electronic warfare at the three points.⁷

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid

5. Ibid.

6. Author interviews with Ukrainian military personnel across 2024 and 2025.

7. Ibid.

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As the Ukrainians have discovered on the frontline around the **besieged** eastern Ukrainian city of **Pokrovsk** and elsewhere, drones cannot replace a soldier holding ground. This is one of the enduring truths of war and bears frequent restating lest the message get lost in the preaching by drone advocates.

This is not to suggest that drones are not important. But much of the data used by analysts is often sourced from drone units, which are constantly on the hunt for resources. Perhaps more importantly, counter-drone technologies are improving rapidly. One wonders if drones and counter-drone systems will achieve parity in many circumstances in future conflicts. As such, the dominance achieved by drones in this war, particularly in the 2022-23 period, may not be seen again.

More evidence-based research by trained military operations researchers is required to delve beyond existing drone dogmas. There is also a need for more strategic debate about the future role of these machines, mainly as partners and extenders of existing capability, rather than as replacers.

3. The Adaptation Battle

Across this author's Ukraine visits between 2022 and 2025, it has become clear that the Ukrainians have improved their ability to learn and adapt. Units observe battlefield trends and learn from the engagement with the enemy. They share lessons with higher headquarters, and there has been an improved capacity for analyzing lessons at the general staff level with a dedicated organization responsible for this function.

Despite this, according to tactical leaders, Russia has moved ahead (marginally) in the tactical adaptation battle. This involves more rapidly changing and successful Russian tactics, as well as more systematic, whole-of-frontline recording and distribution of improved new tactical methods. It combines its evolving infiltration ground tactics with its use of fires (particularly attack drones and glide bombs with improved electronic warfare resilience and longer range) to attack where it identifies gaps or weaker Ukrainian units.⁸

Ukrainian commanders describe Russia's latest tactics as "1,000 bites," where small teams seek gaps in Ukrainian frontline positions, which can be up to 1,000 meters apart, and which generally do not have depth positions.⁹ When a gap is found, the Russians pour through infantry and drones, seeking headquarters and drone operations centers. Where they cannot find a gap, glide bombs or even Shahed drones are used to create one, especially in urban environments.

This is not always successful, but as its recent deep penetration on its Pokrovsk axis of advance demonstrated, this can have operational impacts if successful. It should be expected that Russia

8. Author interviews with Ukrainian military personnel in October 2025.

9. Author interviews with Ukrainian military personnel in 2024 and 2025.

will continue to test and evolve its tactics to achieve similar penetrations of the first line of Ukrainian defenses.

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While a year ago, it would have been fair to state that Russia had a lead in systemic, strategic adaptation and Ukraine had the lead in tactical adaptation, this no longer seems to be the case. It is very likely that Russian efforts to “learn how to learn better” in the past three years have achieved critical mass and are now paying dividends at the tactical and strategic levels.

How much additional tactical and strategic momentum this provides the Russians and their sclerotic ground operations remains to be seen. But it is not a positive development for Ukraine, nor for the rest of Europe.

4. Long-Range Strike Operations

Over the past three years, Ukraine has developed a robust deep-strike capability. It now possesses a strike system that integrates Western and Ukrainian intelligence, weapons, and post-strike assessments in a rolling attack on Russia’s strategic military production and energy infrastructure, with a secondary focus on Russian missile and drone launch and storage facilities.

One element of this Ukrainian campaign that does not receive the same attention as, for example, the spectacular strikes on Russian oil refineries or strategic airfields, is the enabling planning and operations to penetrate Russian airspace before strikes are conducted. This endeavor is extraordinarily complex given the density of Russian sensors and their air, missile, and drone defense systems now embedded throughout western Russia. Ukrainian strike planners, and their supporters from NATO, have a constant program to examine and update their view of the entire Russian air defense system to understand its weaknesses and where to attack it to facilitate strikes on strategic targets inside Russia. For this reason, the recent decision by the U.S. administration to **provide intelligence** for deeper strikes inside Russia is deeply appreciated by the Ukrainians.¹⁰

Ukraine has also **successfully integrated** the planning and execution of penetration activities and strike operations by employing a mix of technical and human resources, sourced both from Ukraine and its foreign supporters. One of the byproducts of this process is a two-way exchange of intelligence. While Ukraine massively benefits from intelligence provided by America and other nations, Ukraine’s supporters also receive great benefits from the intelligence collected before, during, and after deep strike operations inside Russia. This intelligence is a bonanza for the evolution of Western strike planning doctrine and the various weapons and launch platforms that conduct such activities.

In the view of the Ukrainian intelligence agencies, Ukraine’s long-range strike operations have contributed as much to Russia’s economic challenges as have the international sanctions regime that

10. Ibid.

has been in place from almost the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022. However, as several Ukrainian interlocutors also noted, one must be careful not to extrapolate the impact of such strategic strikes on a Western nation onto Russia. There is no real notion of “public opinion” in Russia when assessing the societal impact of these strikes. As Ukrainian intelligence briefers noted, “Only what Putin says matters.” As such, it should not be assumed that these strikes will be a magic bullet for Ukraine. They are an extraordinarily important military endeavor, but insufficient by themselves to force Putin to the negotiating table or to win the war.¹¹

One final aspect of the long-range strike campaign is its adaptive character. The Ukrainians **describe** a strike-counterstrike adaptation spiral as a constant and fast-moving strategic endeavor in both Ukraine and Russia. The Russians continue to learn and improve their air defense posture as well as their deception and activities to counter intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) to complicate Ukrainian and allied strike planning. Russian air defense units move constantly as part of this, but they are also active in developing innovative technologies and techniques. This part of the strike-counterstrike adaptation spiral is moving particularly fast. According to the Ukrainians, new strike and penetration techniques that work one week can be out of date just a week or two afterwards.¹²

According to one intelligence brief I received during my latest visit, the Russians are now also using their vast geography to shift their manufacturing capacity out of the reach of Ukrainian strike operations. This replicates, albeit at a smaller scale, the Russian shift of industry to the east during World War II.

The lesson here for Western military organizations is that deep strike operations are crucial but not the total solution for twenty-first-century war. Strike capabilities that might be highly effective at the start of a future war will evolve in different directions during the conflict. Success will require ongoing investment in technology, retraining, evolving planning, and most of all, adaptive leadership at the highest levels. In the Pacific theatre, it might be anticipated that Chinese strike and counterstrike activities will be at least as good as Russia’s. Any war in the Pacific is likely to have similar characteristics (although not exactly the same) as the strike-counterstrike adaptation spiral in the Ukraine war.

5. Ground-Based Air Defense

In the period since my previous visit to Ukraine in March 2025, the scale and technological sophistication of the challenges posed by the Russian Shahed drones have increased significantly. The average number of drones dispatched nightly and monthly has increased.¹³ Another change is the **sophistication** of the drones. Russia has changed the electronic hardening and the navigation systems of the drones to degrade Ukraine’s capacity to either spoof the drones or gain control of them and steer them to safe areas (or back to launch points). Russia has also introduced **jet-powered Shahed drones**, which travel much faster than the old propeller-driven drones, making them harder to detect and intercept.

There has been rapid evolution of Russian tactics in the employment of Shahed operations. Not only have they been flying higher, making interception with mobile teams .50 caliber machine guns difficult, they fly variable routes and at higher speeds. Shaheds are also being used in larger numbers, with the

11. Author interviews with Ukrainian military and intelligence personnel in March and October 2025.

12. Ibid,

13. One of the best trackers for this, which uses Ukrainian Air Force daily data, is Shahed Tracker at <https://x.com/ShahedTracker>. Ukrainian Air Force also provide daily updates on their Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/kpszs>.

first **500-drone raid** being conducted by the Russians in 2025. According to a briefing from Ukrainian military intelligence personnel, Russia can now produce around 35,000 Shahed drones per year and that this is likely to grow to 40,000 per year by 2030.¹⁴

If Ukraine only had the deal with the different Shahed variants, which also include decoy versions, the problem would be huge. But most Shahed raids are accompanied by smaller numbers of cruise and ballistic missiles, which are difficult to detect and more complex to intercept than the Shaheds. The Russian air threat also includes glide bombs, fixed and rotary wing aviation, frontline ISR and attack drones, as well as long-range reconnaissance drones used to inform deep strikes.¹⁵

Russia has been innovating with its aerial attack capacity in the past two years. It designs its operations to not only destroy key targets, but also to ensure that the mix of weapons used complicates Ukraine's adaptation to Russia's tactics and technologies. In some respects, this represents Russian counteradaptation operations against Ukraine. As an air defense officer in Kyiv noted, "Russia is learning and adapting fast."¹⁶

This environment demands a flexible and adaptive mindset from Ukrainian air defense commanders, the ability to quickly change tactics and processes, and a responsive tech sector to produce solutions to Russian technological innovation. Pulling all these things together is a significant challenge. It is a critical function in which the Ukrainians have demonstrated significant competence in the past three years, aided by their Western supporters.

Western nations need to pay attention to this aspect of the war. Western ground forces, military establishments, and critical national infrastructure are more vulnerable than ever to attack from the air, be it drones, cruise missiles, or tactical aviation. In response to Russia's advanced and evolving strike capabilities, Ukraine is integrating frontline and national defense, exquisite and low-cost systems, while using rapid operational analysis and the fast evolution of personnel training on new systems. This is worthy of closer study.

6. Russia's Contemporary Asymmetric Advantages

Russia has now developed overlapping asymmetric advantages:

- Russia **continues to lead** in systemic and strategic adaptation.
- Russia is now probably better (marginally) in tactical adaptation and doing it systematically along the front line.
- Russia now has a small advantage with frontline drone operations, especially with the establishment and proliferation of Rubicon drone units.
- Russia's manpower **advantage** is long-standing.
- Russian FPV drones with fiber-optics have excellent cameras—developing high-definition battlespace imagery for targeting.

14. Briefing provided to the author on a visit to Ukraine in October 2025.

15. Author interviews with Ukrainian military and intelligence personnel in March and October 2025.

16. Author interview with a Ukrainian air defense officer in Kyiv in October 2025.

- Russian operational-level **command and control** is probably more systemic and effective than Ukraine's.
- Tactical aviation fires is a final area where Russia has an advantage, especially with long-range (and getting longer) glide bombs.

Each of these advantages is a concern for Ukraine. But this is the first time in this war that this many overlapping strategic and tactical asymmetries have favored Russia. To use a well-worn metaphor, Russia is lining up the holes in the Swiss cheese.

Key questions are: How does Ukraine hold on? And why isn't Russia more successful?

A related issue is how Russia has slowly but surely improved its institutional and tactical learning systems over time. How have they done so, and how have they overtaken Ukraine's adaptation mechanisms? Finally, has too much bureaucracy (as some interlocutors suggested) compromised the adaptive spirit that was characteristic of the Ukrainian way of war in 2022?

7. War Strategy and Trajectory

As one of my Ukrainian interlocutors said, Ukraine having to produce its own strategy is a very recent phenomenon.¹⁷ For much of its history, it has been (as Australian politician Jim Molan described in ***Danger on our Doorstep***), "a strategy taker, not a strategy maker." This means that the development of the capacity for strategic thinking, planning, and execution remains, in the view of some in Ukraine, less developed in the Ukrainian state and military in comparison to Russia.

At present, there also appears to be no obvious theory of victory—or theory of success—for Ukraine other than the current approach, which appears to be keeping the United States close, sustaining European support, and hurting Russia militarily and economically. But these are political and strategic tasks, not a strategy or a theory of victory. Ukraine is ensuring Russia cannot win the war, but with its current resources, probably cannot do so itself.

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Each strategy Ukraine has tried so far—be it the initial resist-and-sanction approach, the lightening assaults in 2022 to change Putin's calculus, or ongoing resistance and long-range strikes over time to do the same—has failed to produce a significant change in Putin's will to achieve his objective in this war: subjugation of Ukraine. Now, Ukraine is seeking to hurt Russia as much as it can on the ground and in its deep strike campaign to get Putin to negotiate. That, too, appears to have tenuous long-term foundations. Putin does not think like contemporary Western politicians.

Until Ukraine and its partners can fundamentally shift Putin's view of the balance of power, and do so in a substantial manner, it is hard to see the trajectory of this war shifting significantly from its current

17. Author interviews with Ukrainian strategic analyst in Kyiv, October 2025.

path. This is a war where one side is fighting desperately for the existence of its culture and standing as a sovereign nation.

Putin is fighting to change the balance of power in Europe, but at a basic level, he is now also fighting for his own existence. He cannot lose and survive. A peace deal now would see hundreds of thousands of veterans of an unwon war returning home. Russian leaders, who have seen veterans of failed wars play a part in political instability after the Russo-Japanese War, World War I, and the Afghanistan and First Chechen Wars, have a deep and historically informed fear of Ukrainian veterans returning home to cause political and societal chaos.

Perhaps the best Putin can do is freeze the Ukraine conflict, and with large elements of his existing forces in addition to the many new divisions being built in the next few years, initiate something smaller that has a greater chance of generating a winnable war. The latest Russian State Rearmament Plan puts in place an objective of being ready for war with NATO by 2030 (according to a briefing by Ukrainian military intelligence).¹⁸ While this is a capability objective, Putin's grand strategic vision probably sees alignment of this goal with his own intentions.

Conclusions

Notwithstanding the steady will and determination that Ukraine has demonstrated to defend itself, there remain many challenges for the country and its military to overcome. Over the last two years, Russia has developed an overlapping series of asymmetric advantages in manpower, drones, battlefield innovation, and command and control that pose a serious threat to Ukraine, particularly in the ground environment. Russia has learned to learn better, which bodes ill for Ukraine as well as for eastern Europe's future security.

Despite this, Ukraine retains some advantages over Russia. It is fighting at home for its territory, which imbues Ukrainian soldiers with a sense of purpose the Russians lack. Even though there is a large issue with soldiers **going AWOL** from Ukrainian units, the average quality of Ukraine's soldiers remains higher than Russia's. At the same time, Ukraine is fighting on interior lines, which gives it a major strategic and operational advantage. Ukraine's industrial capacity is being buttressed by Europe's growing industrial capacity. Unfortunately, Russia's defense production is **supported** by huge injections of North Korean munitions and significant Chinese support.

Russia's newfound lead in tactical innovation is by no means assured to last. Ukraine has out-thought Russian tactical leaders and methods for much of the war. There is no reason why they cannot continue to do this to reduce Russian advantages.

Support to Ukraine in the military, intelligence, economic, information, and diplomatic domains remains a crucial element of this war. These endeavors are a critical aspect of preventing Russia from achieving its objectives in Ukraine, forcing a just war termination agreement, and deterring future Russian aggression against other parts of Eastern Europe. ■

18. Briefing provided to the author on a visit to Ukraine in October 2025.

Mick Ryan is an adjunct fellow (non-resident) with the Australia Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

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