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Ukrainian Military Performance and Outlook

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) have successfully defended against and pushed back Russian forces in many regions, despite several apparent disadvantages. The UAF has demonstrated flexibility over the course of the conflict to date, as well as an ability to integrate Western security assistance into its military campaigns. The UAF continues to face obstacles to sustaining momentum—including losses in personnel and equipment—against Russian forces, however, as some Ukrainian officials candidly admit.

Since early 2022, the Biden Administration and Congress have supported Ukraine's defense of its territorial integrity against Russia's invasion. The UAF's evolving condition may be of interest to Congress as Members evaluate whether to appropriate additional funds to support Ukraine and how to conduct oversight of U.S. policies and assistance.

Personnel

Some observers note that the UAF's overall performance to date has been in part due to high levels of recruitment and motivation. High losses, however, pose a continued challenge to the UAF's ability to sustain effective operations.

After Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the UAF gained important combat experience fighting Russian-led forces in Ukraine's eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (known as the Donbas). This experience led to a large proportion of trained veterans among Ukraine's population. In 2022, these veterans and other volunteers (including foreign recruits) were quickly mobilized into Ukraine's new volunteer Territorial Defense Forces (TDF) and Reserve without the need for lengthy training. These units have been crucial in supporting regular UAF units, enabling the regular units to spearhead operations and counteroffensives.

Since the beginning of the 2022 war, the UAF reportedly has suffered high levels of casualties, lowering force quality. Losses are likely higher among regular UAF and Special Forces units, leading to a greater reliance on TDF and Reserve units. Many of these TDF and Reserve units also have sustained heavy casualties, further increasing the proportion of new recruits needed to regenerate forces. Unlike in the initial period of the war, when most recruits were veterans, at present most new recruits have little military experience and, as a result, take longer to train. Currently, the UAF is also experiencing growing recruiting challenges; Ukrainian officials have stated they intend to implement further mobilization plans (such as changes in conscription) in the near future.

The UAF faces several challenges in deploying new personnel. First, at the time of the invasion, Ukraine did not have a fully developed professional noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps, which it previously had been seeking to develop along NATO standards. As described above, a high number of trained veterans, many with combat experience, mitigated to some degree the need for an established NCO corps to train and command new recruits. Losses among these veterans have increased the importance of developing a professional NCO corps and affected unit-level capability.

Second, the UAF's need for immediate reinforcements creates pressure to deploy troops with only basic training. To sustain combat operations in the current conflict, however, the UAF continues to balance training personnel to conduct complex operations and operate advanced weaponry with ensuring sufficient personnel are deployed at the front line.

Finally, the UAF struggles to train officers for staff positions to assist commanders in managing and coordinating operations. The lack of trained staff officers has in some cases led to tactical operations being coordinated and managed by higher-level command staff, leading to centralized and slower decisionmaking.

Equipment

The UAF operates a mix of Western and Soviet or Russian equipment. This variety of systems results in diverse capabilities across units and complicates maintenance and standardization. To date, the UAF has sustained significant equipment losses. Some UAF units appear to be operating without mechanized or motorized vehicle support, likely due to losses and limited replacements. Despite losses, Western security assistance and UAF resilience in repairing and maintaining equipment has been crucial to UAF successes.

Ukraine has nearly exhausted its supplies of Soviet and Russian artillery and rocket ammunition, making the UAF almost totally reliant on Western assistance for artillery and rocket artillery systems and ammunition. Ukrainian officials have emphasized a need for long-range rocket and artillery systems to counter Russia's quantitative advantages in long-range fire. The UAF has demonstrated an ability to use qualitative advantages provided by Western security assistance (e.g., long-range precision fires) to mitigate Russian quantitative advantages in artillery.

Ukraine's domestic defense industry produces a wide variety of weapons but has been unable to meet the country's full wartime demands. In addition, Russian forces

have targeted Ukraine's domestic defense industry, affecting its ability to produce and maintain equipment. Some observers highlight the importance of supporting and improving Ukraine's defense industry to fill Ukraine's long-term security needs and reduce its reliance on Western security assistance.

Role of U.S. and Western Security Assistance

Since the start of Russia's 2022 war, the United States has committed more than \$44.2 billion in security assistance to Ukraine. The United States and European allies and partners also continue to contribute training, logistics, and intelligence. Western officials continue to have concerns over escalation, available stockpiles, defense industrial production capacity, and funding to procure and sustain security assistance.

Training

Prior to Russia's 2022 invasion, the United States and other allies contributed training and advice to the UAF. Current training efforts focus on employing and operating Western security assistance; basic infantry skills and unit-level development; and, increasingly, combined arms operations. Observers also note the challenge of simultaneously training personnel on operating weapons systems and on maintenance and sustainment strategies that are crucial to operating systems over the long term.

The UAF still faces pressure to deploy troops in the field with minimum training to replace losses but has increased efforts to prioritize advanced training to support long-term development and the creation of new units. Training will likely grow in importance as the UAF seeks to replace its losses with mobilized personnel.

Equipment

In the initial phase of the war, U.S. and European provision of anti-tank and short-range man-portable air defense (MANPAD) systems was crucial for Ukraine's resistance to Russia's invasion. As the war has evolved, Western security assistance has adjusted to the conditions and the UAF's needs.

At the tactical level, the UAF has identified protected mobility (e.g., armored vehicles, infantry fighting vehicles), tanks (including Leopard, Challenger, and Abrams), and tactical-level fire support (e.g., mortars) among its needs to exploit advances, protect withdrawal, and support operations.

Ukraine's air force and air defenses thus far have proven effective in limiting Russian air superiority. Russia retains air superiority in certain regions, however, and continues to target Ukrainian air defenses. Air defense systems remain a top priority for security assistance, at both the strategic and the tactical levels, including mobile air defense systems to protect units as they advance and support offensive operations. Ukrainian officials say that securing enough ammunition for Ukraine's air defenses is critical in anticipation of Russian targeting of civilian infrastructure this winter.

Current Military Performance and Outlook

The UAF continues to demonstrate high levels of operational flexibility, motivation, and capability. The UAF appears committed to capitalizing on Russian military shortfalls and demonstrating to foreign audiences its ability to retake territory. However, as fighting shifts into more positional and attritional combat, some observers argue the UAF should transition to sustaining combat capability.

The UAF command structure appears to be more centralized than it was earlier in the war. While the UAF seeks to adopt NATO-style principles of command, it still exhibits traits of Soviet-style command, particularly among mobilized officers educated according to Soviet doctrine. Nevertheless, the UAF has demonstrated flexibility and a willingness to adjust operations due to changing circumstances, particularly at the unit and junior levels.

Russia's armed forces retain some advantages in equipment (specifically artillery and armored vehicles, including tanks), air support, and electronic warfare. The UAF has established new units (and re-equipped some existing units) with Western equipment, providing improved capabilities and survivability. Ukrainian officials state that their most urgent needs include air defense, armored mobility (armored and infantry fighting vehicles), artillery (such as M777 howitzers), and long-range fires. In particular, armored mobility is required to upgrade and equip new and existing units.

Ukrainian officials also note the importance of continued ammunition supplies, especially as fighting remains dominated by artillery support. In addition, the UAF has identified needs in logistics (including training and improving processes), breaching equipment (such as mine clearing and bridging capabilities), medical evacuation and care, intelligence, and secure communications.

The UAF still relies on a core of professional units to conduct combined arms operations and spearhead operations, supported by TDF and Reserve units. Recruitment and motivation remain high, but losses, exhaustion, and the need to rotate units likely will remain ongoing challenges. Training new recruits to replace and expand these professional units, as well as officers for staff positions, will likely remain key objectives. The UAF's ability to regenerate forces and maintain force quality likely will be critical to its success.

These developments may factor into congressional decisionmaking regarding whether and how to support Ukraine's defense. Some observers suggest that UAF capabilities will continue to increase with continued U.S. and Western security assistance, especially in key areas, such as air defenses and artillery. Other observers argue that the UAF faces significant hurdles to decisively defeating Russian forces regardless of security assistance.

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