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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 been increasingly challenged to defend against Russian advances, given ongoing disadvantages in personnel and a less developed defense industry. The UAF has demonstrated flexibility over the course of the conflict, as well as an ability to integrate Western security assistance into its operations. Nevertheless, the UAF continues to face obstacles to sustaining momentum against Russian forces, including personnel and equipment losses.

The Biden Administration supported Ukraine's defense of its territorial integrity against Russia's invasion, and since early 2022, Congress has enacted five supplemental appropriations measures to provide assistance to Ukraine. The UAF's evolving condition and performance may be of interest to the 119th Congress as Members weigh the impact of U.S. support for the UAF and consider any potential further assistance.

Personnel

The UAF's overall performance to date has been bolstered, in part, by high levels of recruitment and motivation. High personnel losses and desertion, however, pose continued challenges 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). In 2022, Ukraine was able to quickly mobilize these veterans and other volunteers into new volunteer Territorial Defense Forces (TDF) and the Reserve forces without the need for lengthy training. This likely contributed to UAF effectiveness since Ukraine did not have a fully developed professional noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps, which it previously had been seeking to develop along NATO standards.

Since the beginning of the 2022 war, the UAF has suffered high levels of casualties, lowering force quality. In order to replace these losses, the UAF needs new recruits to regenerate forces. The UAF faces several challenges in deploying new personnel.

The UAF's need for immediate reinforcements creates pressure to deploy troops with only basic training. However, the UAF also needs to train personnel to conduct complex operations and employ advanced weaponry in order to sustain combat operations.

Currently, the UAF also is experiencing recruitment challenges. Reportedly, the average Ukrainian soldier is around 40 years old, and some recruits often have health or substance abuse issues. Ukraine passed legislation in April

2024 to address some recruitment issues (including allowing some prisoners to serve in exchange for a reduced sentence) but continues to reject calls to lower the conscription age from 25 to 18 because of public opposition to lowering the age. The legislation did not deal with the issue of demobilization, and some reports indicate that recruitment officials are resorting to more coercive methods.

Despite the recruiting challenges, the UAF continues to establish new brigades rather than reinforce existing units. Some observers and UAF officers have criticized this approach, arguing that it diverts critical equipment and personnel needed at the front line. These new brigades require further time to train and establish and are often staffed by inexperienced officers, further delaying deployment.

UAF officials state they have the capacity and capability to conduct new recruit training inside Ukraine. Additionally, the UAF reportedly 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 higher-level command staff coordinating and managing tactical operations, leading to centralized and slower decisionmaking.

Equipment

The UAF operates a mix of Western and Soviet-era or Russian equipment. This variety of systems complicates maintenance and standardization. To date, the UAF has sustained significant equipment losses, apparently leaving some UAF units without mechanized or motorized vehicle support. The UAF has exhibited resilience in the face of such losses, in part due to Western security assistance and concerted UAF maintenance efforts.

Ukraine has nearly exhausted its supplies of Soviet and Russian artillery and rocket ammunition, making the UAF almost entirely reliant on Western assistance for artillery systems and ammunition. To date, the UAF has demonstrated an ability to use the *qualitative* advantages provided by Western security assistance (e.g., long-range precision fires) to mitigate Russian *quantitative* advantages in artillery. UAF officials state that shortages in Western artillery ammunition are hampering operations and contributing to Russian advances.

Ukraine's domestic defense industry produces a wide variety of weapons but has been unable to meet the country's full wartime demands. International partners have begun to take steps to help Ukraine strengthen its defense industry capacity (including through joint production agreements with Western defense companies) in order to

meet its long-term security needs, thus reducing its reliance on Western security assistance.

U.S. and Western Security Assistance

Since the start of Russia's 2022 war, the United States has committed almost \$66 billion, the EU over \$52 billion, and the UK over \$10 billion (among other donors) in security assistance to Ukraine. The United States and allies continue to provide training, logistics, and intelligence support to Ukraine. This support is coordinated by NATO Security Assistance and Training for Ukraine (assuming the mission and role of Security Assistance Group—Ukraine) and led by a U.S. three-star general. Simultaneously, Western officials have repeatedly voiced concerns over potential escalation of the conflict, defense industrial production capacity challenges, and the continued availability of funding to sustain security assistance.

Training

The United States and other allies have provided training and advice to the UAF since before Russia's 2022 invasion. Current training efforts focus on employing Western security assistance, basic infantry skills and unit-level development, and combined arms operations. Currently, the UK (Operation Interflex), European Union Military Assistance Mission Ukraine (EUMAM), and United States (Joint Multinational Training Group—Ukraine) conduct a variety of training programs for the UAF. According to the Department of Defense, since 2022, the United States and allied nations have trained more than 156,000 UAF soldiers. Training could 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 systems were critical for Ukraine's resistance to Russia's invasion. As the war has continued, Ukraine's partners have adjusted security assistance to respond to changing conditions and the UAF's evolving needs.

At the tactical level, the UAF has identified protected mobility (e.g., armored vehicles), tanks, and tactical-level fire support among its needs. UAF officials express particular concerns about their reliance on Western supplies of artillery ammunition. Insufficient supplies continue to force UAF units to ration artillery fire.

Acquisition of air defense systems remains a top priority for the UAF, at both the strategic and the tactical levels. Ukrainian officials emphasize the importance of securing ammunition for Ukraine's air defenses in response to ongoing Russian strikes against military and civilian targets.

Current Military Outlook

The UAF continues to demonstrate high levels of tactical flexibility and capability in the face of Russian quantitative advantages in equipment, air support, and electronic warfare. As fighting has become attritional, some observers argue that the UAF should focus on preserving its combat capability and constructing defensive fortifications.

The UAF command structure appears more centralized than earlier in the war. While the UAF seeks to adopt NATO-style (mission command) principles of command, it also exhibits traits of Soviet-style (centralized, top-down) command. Additionally, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky installed General Oleksandr Syrsky in February 2024 as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Syrsky reportedly is more aligned with Zelensky's political views and war strategy.

The UAF continues to seek Western equipment to equip new units and provide improved capabilities and survivability. Ukrainian officials also note the importance of continued ammunition supplies, especially as fighting remains dominated by artillery. Additionally, the UAF has identified needs in logistics, breaching equipment (e.g., mine clearing), electronic warfare, counter-drone technology, intelligence, and secure communications.

The UAF relies on a core of professional units to conduct operations and respond to Russian advances. However, losses and exhaustion continue to degrade these units' capabilities, as they appear increasingly called on to staff various positions across the front line. Often, rather than fighting as cohesive formations, sections of units are detached and sent to other units to compensate for losses. Some observers speculate that overreliance on a few units combined with personnel losses may contribute to Russian advances.

The UAF faces severe infantry shortages and is seeking to recruit more personnel to replace losses and to rotate units from the front line. The shortage of infantry has forced UAF leadership to transfer personnel from support roles and the Air Force to act as infantry. Training new recruits to replace and expand professional units, as well as officers for staff positions, remains a key objective. Furthermore, the UAF faces challenges in equipping new units while simultaneously replacing or upgrading equipment of current units. The UAF's ability to regenerate and maintain force quality arguably will be critical to its success.

In August 2024, the UAF launched a surprise invasion of Russia's Kursk region. The Kursk offensive has raised questions from some observers about how Ukraine's leadership allocates and prioritizes scarce human and material resources (especially as Russian forces continue to capture territory in the Donbas).

Some observers and UAF officers have criticized the UAF leadership's poor communications and decisions on reinforcements. The UAF has also been criticized for its strategy of refusing to withdraw from positions, even risking potential encirclement, further contributing to infantry shortages.

These developments may factor into congressional decisions regarding whether and how to support Ukraine's defense. Some observers suggest that sustained Western security assistance is critical for the UAF to avoid a deteriorating situation. Other observers argue that the UAF faces significant hurdles to decisively defeating Russian forces regardless of security assistance.

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