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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 Russian offensives, despite several apparent disadvantages, including fewer personnel and a smaller domestic defense industry. 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. Nevertheless, the UAF continues to face obstacles to sustaining momentum against Russian forces, including personnel and equipment losses. In March 2023 testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines assessed,

Ukraine's retreat from Avdiivka and their struggle to stave off further territorial losses in the past few weeks have exposed the erosion of Ukraine's military capabilities with the declining availability of external military aid.

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 and performance may be of interest to Congress as Members evaluate whether to appropriate additional funds to support Ukraine and conduct oversight of U.S. policies and assistance.

Personnel

Some observers assert that the UAF's overall performance to date has been bolstered, in part, by high levels of recruitment and motivation. High personnel 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). In 2022, Ukraine was able to quickly mobilize these veterans and other volunteers into a new volunteer Territorial Defense Forces (TDF) and Reserve without the need for lengthy training.

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.

The UAF faces several challenges in deploying new personnel. 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. Due to the high number of trained veterans, many with combat experience, there was less of a need for an NCO corps to train new recruits. Losses among these veterans have increased the importance of developing a professional NCO corps.

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 operate advanced weaponry in order to sustain combat operations.

Currently, the UAF is also experiencing growing recruiting challenges. The reported average age of Ukrainian soldiers is around 40 years old. Ukrainian officials have stated they intend to implement modified mobilization plans (such as changes in conscription) in the near future. UAF officials also have announced a personnel review, alleging that too many personnel are performing support missions.

Additionally, 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 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 or Russian equipment. This variety of systems reportedly contributes to diverse capabilities across units but 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 proven resilient 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 such 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. As of early 2024, however, UAF officials state that a shortage of Western artillery ammunition is hampering operations and contributing to Russian advances (such as capturing the Ukrainian town of Avdiivka).

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 continue to target Ukraine's domestic defense industry.

Some observers assert that Ukraine's international partners should seek to strengthen Ukraine's defense industry capacity (including through joint production agreements with Western defense companies) to help Ukraine meet its 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 support to Ukraine. At the same time, Western officials have repeatedly voiced concerns over potential escalation of the conflict, defense industrial production capacity challenges, and the availability of funding to procure and 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 and operating Western security assistance, basic infantry skills and unit-level development, and combined arms operations. Observers have noted the challenge of simultaneously training personnel to operate and maintain weapons systems.

Although the UAF still faces pressure to deploy troops in the field with minimum training, it has increased efforts to prioritize advanced training to support long-term development. 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 reportedly was crucial 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 and infantry fighting vehicles), tanks (including Leopard, Challenger, and Abrams), and tactical-level fire support (e.g., mortars) among its top security assistance needs. UAF officials express particular concerns about their reliance on Western supplies of artillery ammunition and assert that a lack of supplies has forced UAF units to ration artillery fire.

Ukraine's air force and air defenses have proven effective thus far in limiting Russian air superiority. Russia retains air superiority in certain regions, however, and continues to target Ukrainian air defenses. Provision of air defense systems remains a top priority for the UAF, at both the strategic and the tactical levels, to defend against increasing Russian Aerospace Force operations. Ukrainian officials have emphasized the importance of securing sufficient ammunition for Ukraine's air defenses in anticipation of resumed Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure.

Current Military Performance and Outlook

The UAF continues to demonstrate high levels of operational flexibility, motivation, and capability. As fighting shifts into more attritional combat and Russia leverages its advantages in personnel and artillery, some observers argue the UAF should focus on sustaining its combat capability and constructing defensive fortifications.

The UAF command structure appears to be more centralized than it was earlier in the war. While the UAF seeks to adopt NATO-style (mission command) principles of command, it still exhibits traits of Soviet-style (centralized, top-down) command, particularly among mobilized officers educated according to Soviet doctrine. Additionally, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has replaced most of the senior UAF leadership and installed General Oleksandr Syrsky as the new Commander in Chief. Syrsky is reportedly close to President Zelensky, and his appointment may indicate a greater alignment of political and military decisionmaking.

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

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

The UAF still relies on a core of professional units to conduct combined arms operations and spearhead operations. Casualties, exhaustion, and the need to rotate units remain ongoing challenges. The UAF has recognized the need to recruit more personnel (both to replace losses and to rotate units from the from the frontline), but Ukraine has yet to implement a new mobilization call up. Training new recruits to replace and expand professional units, as well as officers for staff positions, likely will remain a key objective. The UAF's ability to regenerate forces and maintain force quality likely will be critical to its success.

These developments may factor into congressional decisions regarding whether and how to support Ukraine's defense. Some observers suggest the UAF faces a deteriorating situation without further Western security assistance. Other observers argue that the UAF faces significant hurdles to decisively defeating Russian forces regardless of security assistance.

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