

Ten Surprising Lessons for Special Operations Forces from the First 20 Months of Putin's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

This article provides ten surprising lessons for Special Operations Forces (SOF) from the first year-and-a-half of Russia's criminal and ill-advised full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These lessons range from the tactical to the grand strategic, and collectively help explain how Ukraine and NATO managed to "boil Putin's frog" in the years between 2014 and 2022. This strategic success does not change the fact that tragic mistakes have been made and that SOF continue to be misused despite all the efforts to learn from previous misuse of SOF and prevent the repeat of earlier mistakes. These lessons also explain why, paradoxically, the largest conventional war in Europe since 1945 has made future large-scale combat operations by conventional forces less likely and gray zone operations by SOF more strategically relevant than ever before.

KEYWORDS

special operations, Ukraine, Special Operations Forces, lessons learned Ukraine, Ukraine war, Putin Ukraine

The 20 months since Russian President Vladimir Putin launched his full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 have been full of surprises and there will doubtlessly be more surprises in the months and years to come, as this conflict is far from over. Certain lessons are starting to emerge, however, especially for U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF). While these lessons can be drawn both from Ukraine's successes and failures, the extraordinary performance of the Ukrainian people and their armed forces is worthy of acknowledgement; Ukrainians are the true heroes of the current war. Yes, Kyiv has received training and assistance from many of its allies and partners, but the lion's share of the credit for thwarting Putin's war goes to the people of Ukraine.

Ukraine's successes have taken place within the context of a systematic, long-term effort to assist this nation—an effort that began in earnest after Russia's 2014 seizure of Crimea. This effort included the Defense Security Cooperation Agency's (DSCA) Minister of Defense Advisor (MoD-A) program, which helped train and educate the Ukrainian armed forces on everything from NATO doctrine to operational art and strategy. More specifically

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to the discussion here, U.S. SOF committed top-tier forces to assist Ukraine, including Army Special Forces, civil affairs, and psychological operations soldiers, as well as U.S. Navy SEALs and other SOF elements. These forces were deployed and employed by Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) with rotational forces that executed a “365” engagement model measured in years, not months. U.S. SOF were not employed forward into the then-static conflict zone of the Donbas in a combatant role. Instead, as described by the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Commanding General in his Congressional testimony,¹ the U.S. SOF effort focused on the professionalization of Ukrainian SOF defined as the steady arc of building a special operations capability, culture, and joint warfighting organization.² Furthermore, the U.S. SOF investment was orchestrated by select U.S. SOF personnel, on long-term assignments, acting as ministerial-level advisors who assisted in crafting Ukraine’s national security methods—again often with the assistance of DSCA’s MoD-A advisors. This effort included working with Ukraine on Black Sea appropriate applications of the *Resistance Operating Concept* which is a doctrine-like roadmap for pre-building a national resilience and resistance effort.³

Finally, U.S. SOF and select NATO SOF have worked within a larger, multinational effort to reform the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Nothing stimulates reform quite like failure, and Ukraine’s military failure when Russia attacked in 2014 provided an enormous stimulus to Ukrainian armed forces to reflect and rebuild. U.S. SOF played a key role in this larger reform effort. On 29 July 2021, seven months before the invasion, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a law, “On the Foundations of National Resistance.”⁴ He signed this law on the compound of the Ukrainian SOF to signal, legislatively and emotionally, that Ukrainian SOF would be one of the leading organizations for in extremis citizen resistance operations. Indeed, less than seven months after the signing ceremony, Ukrainian SOF were launched on that very role: plan, lead, direct, and conduct special operations both in conventionally contested areas as well as in enemy rear areas.⁵ U.S. SOF had a direct hand in developing the tactical skills, warfighting methods, and doctrinal outlines that prepared Ukrainian forces to conduct guerilla-style warfare. Ukraine, with its history of partisan warfare and experience in combatting Russian regulars and proxies from 2014 to 2022, benefited from this training and conversely imparted to U.S. SOF Ukrainian experiences and lessons.⁶

Each of the ten lessons that follow came as a surprise to U.S. SOF and need to be incorporated into future SOF plans and operations.

Lesson 1: The Gray Zone is back (or the Gray way is still the best way).

When thousands of Russian tanks stormed across the Ukrainian border, it looked like the definitive end of the post-9/11 focus on special operations and the explosive beginning of a new era focused on large-scale conventional combat operations. If Putin had succeeded, it might have been the beginning of a new era, but Putin’s spectacular, catastrophic, and undeniable failure will send rogue and revisionist states back to the gray zone.⁷

The comparison between Russian gray zone tactics against Ukraine in 2014 and its large-scale conventional combat operations against the same adversary in 2022 is unavoidable and the lessons are stark. In 2014, using gray zone tactics, Putin grabbed Crimea at almost no cost, and then he grabbed half of the Donbas, at a very low cost, and he might have held them indefinitely. This time around, using large-scale conventional combat operations, Putin has grabbed a bit more terrain than he did in 2014. But it isn't clear how much he can hold, or for how long. More importantly, unlike 2014, Putin's 2022 land-grab has been astronomically expensive in terms of Russian blood and treasure, expanding and unifying NATO, shattering the reputations of Putin and the Russian military inside and outside Russia, causing heretofore unimaginable open criticism of Putin's leadership inside Russia. And the situation gets worse every day as Ukraine's armed forces continue to improve and Russia resorts to ever more desperate measures to stay in the fight. When he relied on gray zone tactics and techniques, Putin rose to the height of his power, but after resorting to large-scale conventional combat operations, he will be lucky to keep his position and hold the Russian Federation together.

Gray zone activities don't always succeed, but sometimes they do. And when they succeed, they provide an impressive return on investment. If they fail, gray zone tactics do so at low cost in terms of lives and treasure, and they can be denied, lowering the political and reputational cost of failure. On the other hand, large-scale conventional combat operations don't always succeed either, but when they fail, the costs are enormous, and deniability is out of the question.

Conventional invasions will still be cost-effective against small, unprotected neighbors like the Republic of Georgia was when Russia invaded it in 2008 (Georgia had no allies and a population of under 4 million). But against nations of any significant size or with great power allies—like the Baltic states—conventional invasion will not be cost effective for Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, or any other revisionist power, and they are rapidly realizing it. None of them will likely repeat Putin's 2022 mistake anytime soon. Instead, they are much more likely to pursue their goals in the gray zone, and U.S. SOF need to be ready to counter them there.

Lesson 2: The SOF/Counter-SOF fight is decisive in the initial phase of a large-scale conventional war.

The sheer size of large-scale combat operations seemed to eclipse SOF and special operations as decisive factors in major conventional wars, but SOF proved to be decisive in the initial—and arguably most important—phase of the current war, as we will see by examining the war first in the south, and then in the north.

Special Operations Success in the South

The initial stage of Putin's February 2022 full-scale invasion focused on a northern offensive from Belarus south toward Kyiv, and a southern offensive from the Crimean

Peninsula north through Kherson toward Mykolaiv and Odesa. Ukraine knew these were possible invasion routes and had defensive plans to oppose both Russian axes of advance by (among other things) blowing up bridges and opening dams to create impassable water obstacles for Russian forces. In the south, the routes north from Crimea are few and narrow, and the Dnipro River is an enormous obstacle, but the Russians were spectacularly successful. This appears to have been due to successful operations by Russian SOF (including the Federal Security Service, the GRU [Russia's military intelligence agency], and the SVR [Russian Foreign Intelligence Service],⁸ in preventing the destruction of bridges and dams. In U.S. military doctrine such operations are called Operational Preparation of the Environment (OPE) and can include direct action (DA).⁹ The exact mix of bribes, intimidation, deception, and DA used by Russian SOF and intelligence units to clear the way for follow-on conventional forces is not clear, but the results were spectacular with Russian troops breaking out of Crimea, driving 100 km north, crossing the Dnipro, and entering the city of Kherson on the first day of the invasion.¹⁰ The one exception to Russian success in the south was the bridge near Henichesk where a Ukrainian sapper, Vitaly Skakun, became a national hero when he died while blowing the bridge.¹¹

The city of Kherson fell, and the Russians entered Mykolaiv before the Ukrainian forces regrouped, recovered, stopped the Russian advance, and started pushing the Russians back. The damage, however, was done. Ukraine has spent eighteen months and thousands of lives struggling to recapture a small part of the ground it lost in a few days due to Russian SOF's ability to prevent bridges and dams from being blown. Ukraine may never liberate all the land it lost in the south during the first few days of the invasion. Even if those areas are liberated, it will require years of hard fighting and tens of thousands of additional Ukrainian casualties. Those rapid and perhaps irreversible Russian successes in the south were only possible due to OPE by Russian SOF and may represent Russia's greatest (and certainly its cheapest) strategic successes in all of 2022.

Counter-SOF Success in the North

The situation in the north was completely different. Russian SOF failed in their efforts to capture or kill key Ukrainian targets, like President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in the opening minutes, hours, and days of the invasion. The potential water obstacles on the road to Kyiv were unimpressive compared to the ones in the south, but the bridges and dams were blown, as planned, stranding the Russian invasion force in the famous forty-mile-long convoy and allowing Ukrainian forces to pick them off over a period of days.¹² The exact role of Ukrainian SOF (including Ukrainian intelligence services) in Ukraine's successful counter-SOF campaign in the north has not been revealed, and the role of U.S. and NATO advice and assistance may never be fully declassified, but the results are obvious: Russian forces failed to enter Kyiv or capture any major cities in the north.

The success of Russian OPE in the south is a reminder of what might have happened in the north and the decisive role SOF can play in large-scale conventional combat operations.

The successful Ukrainian counter-SOF campaign in the north reminds us that countering enemy SOF are still a critical task and one in which U.S. SOF advice can be essential.

Lesson 3: Resistance can be decisive even before occupation.

We usually think of capital-R Resistance, such as the French Resistance, starting after the conventional fight is lost, when foreign occupation forces are trying to control the population. That was the vision for the *Resistance Operating Concept*¹³ and predecessor documents developed by and for SOCEUR and used when U.S. and NATO SOF advised Ukrainians before the February invasion. However, the Russian forces that swept through northern and north-eastern Ukraine never got the chance to establish themselves as traditional occupation forces because Ukrainian resistance made their occupation untenable almost before it started.

In preparing the Ukrainian public to resist an occupying power, the Ukrainian government (with years of advice and assistance from U.S. and NATO SOF) helped citizens develop the skills and mindset for small-unit (even individual and two-person) guerrilla warfare in their local urban and rural environments. These were the places Ukrainians lived and worked and where they had an enormous advantage over the invaders in knowing the human and physical terrain. The net effect was that as Russian forces dashed toward Kyiv from the north and east, their long supply lines exposed Russian supply trucks to guerrilla attacks by Ukrainians. Destroyed Russian tanks generated the best photos, but without the trucks the tanks cannot survive, and the trucks had to drive hundreds of miles every day, whereas the tanks could hunker-down in defensive positions. This helped make Ukrainian guerrilla attacks on Russian trucks decisively effective against the Russian invaders.

By mid-March the Russian offensive toward Kyiv had pushed deep into Ukraine but had stalled along every axis of advance and Ukrainian forces were counterattacking.¹⁴ The Russians still held a substantial advantage in quantity and quality of military equipment, since High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) and other high end Western equipment would not arrive for months. Most outside observers expected the Russians to defend their gains and the Ukrainians certainly had not assembled the conventional forces necessary to drive the Russians out. Instead, Russia abandoned all the territory in the north and northeast that it had grabbed in the first few weeks of the war—some 45,000 sq km—without a fight and redeployed its forces to reinforce offensives elsewhere.¹⁵

The redeployment did allow Russia to make gains elsewhere, but it certainly appears that guerrilla attacks on Russian supply lines—conducted by irregular local forces and by Ukrainian SOF and conventional forces operating as guerrillas—made the Russian position in the north and northeast untenable. Long before Ukraine had assembled the conventional forces and heavy equipment necessary to conduct a major conventional counter offensive, 45,000 sq km of Ukraine were liberated because guerrilla attacks on Russian supply lines made the Russian position shaky. Thus, infantry weapons and small-unit tactics by a large number of local civilians and reservists with a resistance/resilience mindset and limited

assistance from professional forces can have strategic offensive effects operating behind enemy lines against enemy logistics.

Lesson 4: Traditional SOF raids are still viable against the homeland of a great power.

In the twenty-first century, authoritarian great powers have become extremely hard targets for traditional SOF raids. Air, maritime, and ground defenses around their military facilities and critical infrastructure appeared so comprehensive and technologically advanced that traditional SOF raids looked, to some, like suicide missions. That is, until Ukraine successfully executed such missions inside Russia and Crimea.

Russia has some of the most sophisticated air defense systems in the world and both China and Iran rely heavily on Russian-made air defense systems.¹⁶ And yet, Ukraine was able to conduct a successful strike with attack helicopters 35 km inside Russia to destroy a key logistics hub at Belgorod,¹⁷ and Ukrainian drone strikes have repeatedly hit Russian air bases, Moscow, and even the Kremlin itself.¹⁸ These successes indicate that SOF helicopters and drones can successfully penetrate the home airspace of a great power in wartime to conduct strikes or insert troops.

Even more impressive were Ukrainian attacks (presumably SOF raids) on Russian military installations in Crimea that destroyed nine Russian fighter jets on the ground and several ammunition storage sites.¹⁹ In addition to state-of-the-art air and maritime defenses in Crimea, Russia had eight years to implement the most advanced and intrusive population control measures to prevent insurgent activity and catch any Ukrainian SOF who try to infiltrate Crimea. Ukraine's most spectacular strategic success in its raids on Russian infrastructure was the destruction of the Kerch bridge between Crimea and Russia on 8 October 2022.²⁰ At the time of this writing in June 2023, Ukrainian forces continue successful sabotage operations against Russian rail lines inside Russia and in Crimea and other Russian occupied areas of Ukraine proving that after eighteen months of war Russia still cannot prevent these SOF raids.²¹

It is now clear that traditional SOF infiltration is still possible against state-of-the-art countermeasures by a great power in wartime. It is worth noting that, except at the very beginning of the invasion, Russian SOF have not been able to conduct comparable DA strikes on Ukrainian military installations. The superior capabilities of Ukrainian SOF are a testament to their skill and courage, but also to the advice and assistance Ukrainian SOF have received from U.S. and NATO SOF.

In an unclassified forum it is inappropriate to reveal how much of Ukraine's capability in Crimea and elsewhere comes from Ukrainian SOF infiltrated after February 2022, how much from partisans who were already in Crimea and elsewhere before February 2022, how much comes from Russian agents and saboteurs working for Ukraine, and how much comes from other sources. It is also inappropriate to discuss technological details of

these operations. But it is fair to point out that Ukraine, with a pre-invasion annual defense budget of about \$6 billion, has relied on mastery of fundamentals like planning, training, and tradecraft, rather than exotic technology. It is also noteworthy that the early attacks focused on targets such as ammunition storage, where flames or a small number of explosives could have a large effect. With the attack on the Kerch bridge, Ukraine also demonstrated the capability to deliver large explosives via SOF techniques to critical infrastructure targets.

It is also worth noting that Ukraine is using SOF raids to compensate for the long-range air and missile strike capabilities it lacks. A nation like the U.S. that has such capabilities could combine SOF raids with other long-range strike capabilities to create gaps in Anti-Access, Area Denial (A2AD) systems and produce exponentially greater effects.

Lesson 5: There will be political limitations on SOF raids inside the homeland of a great power.

Before February 2022, concern about the feasibility of SOF raids inside the A2AD bubble of a great power caused SOF to focus on overcoming those challenges. As the previous lesson indicates, the practical problems were overcome. However, while SOF were developing tactics, techniques, and procedures to conduct SOF raids deep inside the homeland of a great power, SOF were not studying the political risks of such operations.

Large-scale combat operations against nuclear powers armed with intercontinental ballistic missiles always run the risk of escalation to nuclear war and to areas outside the current theater of armed conflict. Escalation risks must therefore be considered when approving SOF raids deep inside the homeland of a great power. Furthermore, it is difficult to motivate Russian soldiers or mobilize the Russian nation in support of an obvious war of aggression like Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, attacks deep inside the Russian homeland risk reframing the war as one in defense of Russia and necessary to eliminate an unacceptable threat to the safety of both Russia and individual Russians. Without the attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government would have found it difficult to mobilize the nation for a war against Japan, but after the attack, both political parties and the vast majority of Americans were fully committed to do whatever was necessary to defeat Japan. SOF raids deep inside the homeland of a great power need to consider the risk of a Pearl Harbor effect when the goal is merely to force the enemy to abandon his war of aggression.

Prior to February 2022, U.S. SOF did not routinely consider the risk of escalation or the risk of a backfire Pearl Harbor effect when considering DA raids deep inside the homeland of a great power. In the future these strategic risks will need to be considered because the authorities who approve such missions will need to be confident the risks are manageable, and the SOF briefers will need to be prepared to answer their questions.

Lesson 6: Misuse of SOF is still a problem well into the twenty-first century.

After the end of the Cold War, and particularly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the position of SOF dramatically improved within the military hierarchies of many nations. There has been a global proliferation of headquarters, vaguely analogous to that of USSOCOM, with Ukraine and even Russia creating a Special Operations Forces Commands (KSSO).

The new SOF prominence was intended to get better strategic results from these forces but also provided reason to hope the routine misuse of SOF that had been so common during the twentieth century would be coming to an end. The fighting in Ukraine shows those hopes to have been premature since both Russia and Ukraine seem to have misused their SOF more often than they should have. While exact casualty figures for both sides are closely guarded secrets, available information suggests that SOF on both sides have suffered great and that these heavy losses have been suffered when SOF were used as conventional forces.²²

This is a repetition of past mistakes that a more prominent role for senior SOF leaders was supposed to prevent. SOF have exceptional small unit tactical skills, but they typically lack the firepower, armor protection, and ground mobility of conventional forces, and as a result, they suffer excessive losses when used as assault forces or in static defensive positions. Excessive losses among SOF personnel are a serious problem in a long-term war of attrition like the one underway in Ukraine because competent SOF require a much longer training period than conventional forces so losses can only be replaced slowly. Furthermore, excessive losses among pre-war SOF can leave the force without the mid-level leaders needed to lead and mentor the new SOF personnel recruited and trained after the heavy fighting began. Without these mid-level leaders, the force may never regain its pre-war levels of effectiveness. Hopefully the Ukrainians have learned from their earlier mistakes and built up sufficient conventional forces to meet their conventional needs without throwing SOF into the line and will limit SOF operations to those that only SOF can do while keeping SOF casualty rates within sustainable limits, but the experience in the early stages of the war indicate that crisis situations—like that facing Ukraine in the early stages of the full-scale invasion—will still encourage senior leaders to waste SOF even when there is a Special Operations Forces Command available to recommend otherwise.

Lesson 7: Traditional resistance activities are politically vital and remain viable in the twenty-first century.

Before Putin's war, it was not clear that traditional resistance was still viable. The lack of effective Ukrainian resistance in Crimea and the occupied portions of the Donbas since 2014, and China's apparent success in crushing resistance in Hong Kong after 2020 suggested that twenty-first century authoritarian great powers could prevent or crush traditional resistance movements. The ongoing success of Ukrainian resistance, 20 months into the occupation, suggests that traditional resistance is still possible and strategically effective today.

Putin has expanded the Russian Federation by annexing foreign regions controlled by Russian troops (as he did in Crimea) and by recognizing and protecting contested regions of foreign countries that declare independence or autonomy (as he did in Georgia, Moldova, and the Donbas region of Ukraine immediately before he launched his full-scale invasion in February 2022). In contested regions, a vital aspect of this expansion technique is the installation of hand-picked pro-Moscow leaders and governing cliques who can pose as legitimate governments entitled to declare independence. Annexation is legitimized through a referendum that, no matter how dishonestly conducted, appears to prove the local population has freely chosen to join the Russian Federation.

In newly occupied portions of Ukraine, resistance forces have successfully conducted traditional resistance activities including intimidation and assassination of local officials who support the occupiers,²³ attacks on occupation forces, attacks on occupier logistics, sabotage of various kinds,²⁴ and anti-occupation propaganda.²⁵ While the official website of the Ukrainian Resistance²⁶ would have been new to the members of the French Resistance, most of Ukraine's resistance in occupied areas would look very familiar to them.

Ukrainian resistance activities have achieved strategic effects by severely disrupting governance in occupied areas. Most importantly, resistance activities forced the Russians to postpone referenda legitimizing Russian occupation due to security concerns.²⁷ The Kremlin eventually rushed through sham referenda, but Ukrainian resistance delayed them for months. That action continues to cast doubt on the validity of those votes and helps justify Ukraine's continued efforts to liberate occupied areas. These are high strategic priorities for Ukraine and its supporters, and the ongoing success of Ukrainian resistance proves that traditional resistance is still possible and strategically effective today. However, one important caveat is that resistance infrastructure has been more effective facilitating attacks by Ukrainian SOF than by conducting attacks themselves because SOF usually conduct more effective attacks and resistance cells are more likely to be captured after an attack, they conduct themselves than after a SOF attack they facilitate.²⁸

Lesson 8: Preplanned resistance requires more secrecy than normal government activities.

In anticipation of a potential Russian invasion, Ukraine developed an extensive resistance infrastructure before the 2022 full-scale invasion. Unfortunately, lists of resistance personnel were in local government databases and therefore captured when the Russians overran towns and cities in southern Ukraine. The Russian intelligence services also worked hard to find traitors within the Ukrainian government and resistance organizations who could provide the Russians with lists of names. Thus, when Russian occupation forces implemented filtration operations in occupied Ukraine modeled on those used by Stalin, the Russians had the benefit of more extensive kill-lists than they should have had. This lesson needs to be learned by every nation developing a resistance infrastructure. Pre-invasion resistance-organizing

activities need extraordinary security measures that sacrifice some government transparency and accountability to protect against the threat of traitors and captured databases.²⁹

Lesson 9: Frogs can be boiled.

There is a story that if you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, the frog will realize the danger and immediately jump out. But if you drop the frog in a pot of cool water it will sit there, and you can slowly heat the pot and boil the frog without it noticing the gradual change in temperature until it's too late. Essentially, Ukraine, NATO and the U.S. were trying to use this method to “cook” Putin’s military domination over Ukraine. By the time the frog (Putin) noticed he was getting boiled and jumped to a full-scale invasion, it was too late.

Recall that in 2014 the Russian military was vastly superior to the Ukrainian military and could easily stop a Ukrainian offensive in the Donbas with a few thousand troops who Russia claimed were not active-duty soldiers and were simply on vacation. Ukraine responded to this humiliation by reforming and rebuilding its military with the intention of creating a force that could defeat, or at least deter, a full-scale Russian invasion. NATO and the U.S. supported Ukraine in this effort, but all three parties saw rebuilding the Ukrainian military as a long-term project that must proceed slowly so as not to provoke an overwhelming Russian response. The U.S. and NATO were very careful to “boil the frog” slowly by strictly limiting the weapons they provided to Ukraine. Instead, NATO and the U.S. focused on training, education, and reform efforts that were less visible and hence more likely to escape Russian notice or raise Moscow’s ire, like IMET (eventually training Ukrainian soldiers at some of the West’s premier professional military education [PME] institutions and training schools such as SAMS and Special Forces Qualification course). They also emphasized concepts like resistance that might deter a Russian invasion but posed no offensive threat to Russia, and hence were less likely to provoke an invasion.

Putin, the “frog,” eventually noticed the temperature was rising and realized he could not stop it from rising further. Putin saw Ukraine shifting toward the West and his ability to intimidate Ukraine slipping away. He decided to jump out of the pot and re-establish his dominance over Ukraine through a full-scale invasion while he still had the chance. The results indicate that he waited too long. Putin’s frog in Ukraine was already boiled and it jumped out of the pot and into the fire, losing not only the ability to influence and intimidate Ukraine but risking the ability to influence and intimidate Russians, as he gradually loses control of Russia itself.

Putin’s response to gradual failure has important implications for SOF because SOF are a premier frog-boiling force. Other forms of Security Force Assistance (SFA), such as selling F-16s or HIMARS to a partner nation, are highly visible and provide the recipient with obvious offensive capabilities. This makes them poor choices for slowly boiling a frog. On the other hand, long-term, small-footprint, unpublicized SOF engagement is an excellent way to increase the temperature without being noticed by the enemy. Based on Putin’s response to the slow boil technique, SOF planners need to remember that no matter how

slowly you raise the temperature, the frog will eventually notice the rising temperature in the pot. However, if SFA is done carefully and correctly, the frog will notice too late, as Putin did.

Lesson 10: SFA and SOF are vital parts of integrated deterrence because they can defeat competitors even when nuclear and conventional deterrence are abandoned.

As Russia prepared for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. and NATO took their nuclear and conventional forces off the table by announcing that the U.S. and NATO would not participate in direct combat operations against Russia in Ukraine. However, both the U.S. and NATO indicated that a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine would lead to a dramatic increase in SFA to Ukraine and support to various forms of resistance by Ukraine's population.

Vladimir Putin was not impressed, but he should have been. When he launched his invasion against Ukraine, he was confident the Russian military would rapidly and completely defeat Ukraine's armed forces, that Russian security services could cope with whatever resistance might later emerge, that NATO and U.S. assistance to Ukraine would not make a difference, and finally, that Ukrainian special operations would not make a difference either. He was mistaken on every point.

Putin built an impressive military force through the "New Look" reforms he initiated in the aftermath of Russia's August 2008 attack on Georgia, but that force is being devoured by a Ukrainian military Putin held in contempt. Ukrainian courage and competence have been a major factor in Ukraine's success, but Western assistance, training, and advice helped build Ukrainian competence and courage before the full-scale invasion and have bolstered them since. Putin readily admits that Western SFA is preventing him from achieving his goals.³⁰ He claims Western SFA is merely delaying the inevitable, but everyone can see that SFA is also dramatically increasing the cost to Russia and decreasing the chance of an outcome in Russia's favor.

When the West made SFA, in all its SOF and non-SOF forms, the main effort to assist Ukraine and thwart Russia, Putin scoffed. He should have been deterred. Western SFA has radically changed the costs and benefits of invading Ukraine. Putin was not deterred, but future aggressors will have his grim example to ponder. For example, the Chinese Communist Party and President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping held the Russian military in high regard at the end of 2021 and had little-to-no respect for the Ukrainian military. However, they can see that NATO and U.S. SFA transformed the battlefield from one where Russian victory seemed assured, to one where Russian forces are being destroyed while failing to achieve any of their strategic goals, despite repeated declarations by Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov to the contrary.

Putin's misfortune stands as a warning to other would-be aggressors that the U.S. and Western SFA can decisively flip the correlation of forces against an aggressor. As a

result, SFA should join nuclear and conventional deterrence as a key part of integrated deterrence in the future. Deterrence theorists should take note.

Preliminary Conclusions

It is risky to announce lessons from the current Russo-Ukraine War, since it will continue to evolve, but the ten lessons above will likely stand the test of time and be joined, rather than replaced or overturned, by any additional lessons as the war continues. Assessing the direct impact of a multi-year, force and institution-building engagement strategy is difficult. The importance of SFA can easily be overstated or mistakenly overlooked. U.S. SOF investments in Ukraine were based on the persistent presence of a light footprint and focused on Ukrainian SOF within a larger defense reform effort. That larger effort inculcated NATO-compatible methods, practices, and perspectives with an emphasis on Ukrainian homeland security. These investments represent a major success for U.S. SOF in strategic competition and a way—though not the only way—for U.S. SOF to contribute to integrated deterrence. U.S. SOF brought lessons to Ukraine on national resistance and took home Ukrainian views on contesting Russian regulars and irregulars, thus benefiting both nations at great expense to our adversaries.³¹

Endnotes

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