

THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT - THE IRREGULAR APPROACH AS A WAR OF ATTRITION

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Abstract: *The unconventional/irregular conflict model, which could be successful in Ukraine, has as conceptual foundation the idea that strong will can defeat a superior economic and military power, and that this type of conflict can be carried out over very long periods of time, often decades. This article analyzes the hypothesis that in the Ukrainian territory occupied by Russia or in the Russian areas controlled by the Ukrainian military, the unconventional/irregular tactics, the atypical and decentralized actions of small-scale structures that aim to exploit the vulnerabilities of the conventional and heavy arsenal of the Russian Federation army would lead to more successes for Ukraine. The research methods used, the qualitative and comparative analysis, as well as the case study, have an exploratory and interpretative character, aiming at a deep understanding of military decisions, of the consequences of actions and their impact on the situation on the ground.*

Keywords: War of attrition, irregular approach of conflict, Russian-Ukrainian conflict, military deception, atypical actions

1. Introduction

Many military theorists and analysts believe that the 21st century, due to the complexity of the security/operational environment, has brought to attention some transformations regarding the armed conflict. In addition to the classic/conventional combat actions, atypical/unconventional and hybrid actions are increasingly occurring as forms of military confrontation. However, these are not new, but have been well-known throughout the history of wars. Moreover, in various environments, it is stated that the unconventional/irregular warfare is much older than the conventional warfare, and its roots go back to the period of tribal societies. Throughout history, these wars have received numerous names: war of attrition, atypical, ambiguous, civil, against

terrorism, insurrection, insurgency, indirect aggression, zonal confrontation, low (small) intensity conflict etc., with numerous examples: the wars of the Romanian countries with the Ottoman Empire, the guerrilla wars in China and Sudan, the civil wars in Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Angola, the unconventional conflicts in Vietnam, Chechnya, Kosovo, Ukraine, Syria, the insurgency in Afghanistan etc.

2. Research Methodology

This article analyzes the *hypothesis* that in the Ukrainian territory occupied by Russia or in the Russian areas controlled by the Ukrainian military, the unconventional/irregular tactics, the atypical and decentralized actions of small-scale

structures that aim to exploit the vulnerabilities of the conventional and heavy arsenal of the Russian Federation army would lead to more successes for Ukraine.

The research question is whether, by utilizing methods and tactics specific to the concept of *Irregular Warfare* and integrating into future military operations the experience gained by certain unconventional groups/organizations in fighting conventional armies, Ukrainian military structures could achieve more beneficial outcomes in the war against the Russian Federation.

To conduct the scientific research within the paper, we employed several types of research approach strategies: inductive/experimental (proceeding from specific observations to general conclusions), deductive/hypothetical (proceeding from general principles to specific instances), and analogical (based on analogies or identifying similarities with known phenomena).

The methods of data collection for the research were also diverse, ranging from the study of specialized documents (national and international public databases, public institutions, organizations, media etc.) to case studies, which involved extensive as well as in-depth analyses of the actual situation of the conflict in Ukraine.

The methods and techniques for processing information involved the critical evaluation of documentary sources, the organization and systematization of information from the perspective of the subject under study, the correlation of data derived from documentation, and the identification of causal relationships between different variables, depending on the intended purpose.

3. Irregular Conflict Approach

In general, the actors with superior military power, as it is the case with the Russian Federation, have the option of a decisive victory, and therefore non-traditional/attrition approaches are very easy to understand, because, basically, the actors with lower military potential, this time the situation in Ukraine, are more willing (have to) attract into the conflict the

components that contribute to reducing the asymmetry between forces, the civilian and unconventional/irregular parts, avoiding, at the same time, the open combat with the stronger adversary.

If we think of such examples, it is inevitable not to refer to the wars waged by the rulers of the Romanian lands with the Ottoman Empire, in which the Romanian armies were clearly inferior to the Ottoman ones, avoiding battles in open spaces, preferring methods and procedures of combat that would compensate for this disadvantage. Thus, the “scorched earth” tactic was used, through which crops, vegetation and houses were destroyed, and the population retreated to places that were difficult to access. This tactic created difficulties for the enemy in supplying forces (providing good fighting conditions), in planning actions and even in gathering information. The war of attrition against the Ottoman armies involved the implementation of ambushes, harassment attacks/with limited objectives or even decisive attacks on small groups separated from the main forces.

Also, these conflict situations between actors (state or non-state) can take the form of insurgencies, border disputes, terrorism, separatist conflicts, ethnic and religious violence, coups d'état etc., in which proxy forces, atypical, unconventional, insurgent, terrorist elements etc. are most often employed.

In the specialized literature, irregular conflict is the conceptualization of a way of approaching military actions and the actions in other (civilian) fields, already used in various conflicts and theaters of operations to counteract the effects of the actions of proxy, terrorist, insurgent or subversive forces.

Irregular Warfare is “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations. Irregular warfare favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to

erode an adversary's power, influence and will" [1].

The irregular warfare is also defined as “*a form of warfare that has as its objective the credibility and/ or legitimacy of the relevant political authority with the goal of undermining or supporting that authority*” [2]. Such an example is the insurgent group Daesh or the Islamic State (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria - ISIS) which managed to control extremely large areas on the territory of two sovereign states: Syria and Iraq, as well as to gain the support of large populations. Surprisingly, the support of all kinds, financial, human, material, moral etc., was offered not only by the population of the territories conquered through irregular methods, but also from other continents, Africa and Europe.

4. Successes in Applying the Principles of the Irregular Conflict in Ukraine

The irregular conflict also represents that conflict in which *one or more parties involved adopt atypical/non-traditional methods* and in which *unconventional forces* are used.

The unconventional/irregular forces are made up of individuals or groups who, most of the time, are not officially enlisted in the armed forces (army, police or other internal security forces) of a nation-state or other legally constituted entity. Practically, the personnel from the army, police etc. are excluded from the category of *irregular forces*, but, nevertheless, such exclusion is inappropriate when a person or a group belonging to these structures operates in support of activities planned by government structures or under the coordination of military Headquarters. The *irregular forces* can be proxy forces, guerrillas, paramilitary forces, criminal groups, insurgents, terrorists, mafia-type associations, pressure groups or any combination of these. Also, mercenaries, hackers, compromised commercial and public entities, active supporters (volunteers or coerced) may be affiliated with irregular forces.

In Ukraine, one can talk about military groups such as the *International Legion for the Defense of Ukraine* [3], representing military structures formed by foreign volunteers who decided to fight alongside the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022. The International Legion was created to strengthen the defense of Ukraine, combining the experience and skills of various nationalities. This includes volunteers with military experience, but also civilians without previous training who want to help. The contribution of these foreign fighters is considered crucial in the war against Russia, especially in terms of tactical diversity and international solidarity.

One of these international structures is the Romanian Battlegroup “Getica”, created in September 2023 as a unit made up of Romanians from Ukraine, but which has since expanded to accept fighters from Romania and the Republic of Moldova motivated to keep Russia as far away from the borders of these two countries as possible. The members of the group took part in important battles in various regions of Ukraine, but were especially involved in subversive/irregular operations, harassment campaigns against the Russian secret services, as well as incursions into Russia for months in 2024 [4]. *Guerrilla and deception operations (Military deception)* are elements of the information and combat space that create confusion and insecurity among the enemy and the civilian population.

This is not something new in Ukraine because, in the period 2014-2022, the Russian Federation also used proxy forces extensively, both to take control of Crimea (the little green men) and during the confrontations in southeastern Ukraine between the Ukrainian Army and the so-called “pro-Russian separatists”.

In the attrition/irregular conflict the central idea is to influence and/or control the civilian population in the confrontation area, and not to conquer the forces of an

adversary or its territory. In this type of conflict the following are relevant: gaining the support of the neutral civilian population, gaining authority in terms of governance and eroding the control and influence of the adversaries in the region and over the civilian population. The aim is also to undermine the power of the other party in the conflict or an ideology by influencing the population.

The parties involved in the conflict, whether they are states or non-state actors, “will try to undermine the legitimacy and credibility of their adversaries. At the same time, through political, military, psychological and economic methods, they seek to maintain their legitimacy and credibility, so that they can exercise authority over a region” [5].

Thus, the key elements of the *attrition conflict* that must be applied to Russia are:

- the use of indirect/non-traditional approaches;
- the implementation and support of prolonged/attrition campaigns with irregular confrontations;
- the focus on the will of the military adversaries, as well as of the civilian population;
- the implementation of multidimensional actions, on the one hand, and the need for an integrative/comprehensive approach (using capabilities from all areas: political, military, economic, informational, diplomatic etc.) on the other hand.

In the successes achieved by some state or non-state entities with low combat power against more powerful actors, a relevant factor was *combining irregular tactics with conventional capabilities, combining kinetic lethal force with psychological influence, combining the effects of combat resources with those of non-military instruments, violence with moral and material support, terrorism with criminal acts, all of this in order to exploit vulnerabilities and avoid the strengths of the opposing side.*

This implies, from our point of view, the complex use of both conventional and

unconventional and civilian military capabilities, simultaneously, in the same theater of confrontation. The synergy of these actions will aim to create an environment characterized by uncertainty, insecurity, chaos, armed attacks and sabotage through which to induce terror, undermine order/security and discredit the legitimacy of government authorities, and of military/security forces.

5. Challenges in Supporting Irregular Confrontations

Although it can be considered a classic military incursion, the penetration of Ukrainian armed forces into the Kursk region of Russia on 6 August 2024 and the long-term retention, under Ukrainian control, of important areas of territory within the borders of Russia represents, from our point of view, a *successful operation, also within the scope of the irregular approach.*

In this regard, it is emphasized that the irregular approach to conflicts poses various challenges for conventional military forces, since it is assumed that they should manage the conflict from two points of view, both the military and the non-military component. Therefore, if the effects of irregular actions manifest themselves in various fields, political, social, economic, military, psychological etc., there is certainly a need for specialized bodies, forces and instruments to solve the specific problems in each of these fields.

Such a complex and multidimensional action context must also be approached from the perspective of the need for support provided to Ukraine by the USA and the European states.

In order to effectively resist Russian aggression, Ukraine must develop a *center of gravity* based on *three extremely important pillars*. These pillars are maintaining the *international support*, both military and economic, benefiting from cutting-edge military technology, *the ability of own military forces* to repel the Russian attack in conditions where the balance of

forces is unfavorable to it, the *mobilization and effective integration of all instruments of national power*: political, diplomatic, informational, military, economic etc.

Given the operational environment in which hostilities are taking place, the Ukrainian army must remain a credible one, relying on a robust military force with the necessary capabilities to face the challenges of the battle space (land, air, naval, informational). The Ukrainian military forces must also be supported by robust defense industry both national and belonging to the contributing states. The land forces, supported by the other armed forces, represent a crucial force in achieving the goal of regaining lost territory, maintaining territorial integrity and ensuring the security of territorial borders. The training of the Ukrainian armed forces by Western states, instructing them to effectively use the modern military technology, is another significant aspect in maintaining the will to fight at high levels.

Also, in addressing the *war of attrition*, the analysis of the current Russian-Ukrainian war highlights the strategic importance of cities. The Ukrainian armed forces adapted to the situation, conducting an effective urban war, and using cities as real fortresses and training bases for military operations. *“Like it or not, war happens in the cities and among the people”* [6]. The importance of cities is given by the fact that they are political-administrative, economic, industrial and cultural centers which are in an accelerated process of expansion. In the large cities there are often located the main railway junctions, the elements of the critical infrastructure of the region or state, large reserves of raw materials, food and industrial products and the most important aspect, the human resource that serves the previously mentioned elements. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has shown us that the success of military operations can depend on maintaining at all costs the urban complexes that determine the functioning of the state.

In an analysis for the West Point Military Academy, Sandor Fabian, a Hungarian military expert with extensive military experience, identified 10 lessons learned from the conflict in Ukraine that define the current operational environment. The observations, as the author calls them, are basically lessons on how not to approach such a modern conflict. What is interesting to note is that many of them refer to the irregular approach. Along with the observation quoted above, we also mention: *“Never present your adversary with a type of war that he is organized, trained, and equipped for; Deception is still a force multiplier; Strategic depth is crucial for survival, Forget armor and other big-ticket, traditional military platforms; Intimate knowledge of your enemy is an invaluable force multiplier”* [6].

Analyzing the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, we can also observe another atypical approach in the area of irregular conflict patterns, namely, the transition from classic military equipment to light and fast weapons systems with very high mobility and low manufacturing cost, such as *drones*, which has also created asymmetry in the military confrontation. The constantly evolving scope of the drone and its ever-increasing use signal not only the possibility for drones to equalize the balance of power in the Russia-Ukraine war, but also their ability to influence the way future conflicts will be fought.

6. Conclusions

The most appropriate approach for those who fail to develop their conventional military capabilities sufficiently to have a chance of winning the confrontation would be to try to transform the conflict into one of attrition/guerrilla warfare.

Conventional armies have always been vulnerable to atypical/asymmetrical/irregular approaches. The Roman army was a true *“war machine”*, and, for a long time, the legions (as combat devices) proved to be the very expression of perfection in planning,

organizing and conducting military actions. They were formidable in confrontations against armies of similar caliber, but they proved *less effective* when forced to fight in atypical conditions, imposed by migratory tribes that based their combat concepts on flexible formations and much faster cavalry maneuvering actions, thus adding a particularly consistent psychological component.

Thus, the military conflicts carried out in recent decades, as well as the analyses and studies published in the specialized literature on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, demonstrate the existence of these atypical/asymmetric approaches that combine conventional and irregular capabilities. In this sense, the hybridization of actions and the development of integrated civil-military capabilities represent also the result of the approach of *the irregular/attrition conflict pattern*, with notable results in Ukraine.

Emerging and disruptive technologies developed at a very fast pace have generated significant transformations of the battle space and of military actions dynamics. The battle space of the future will certainly have the following characteristics: it will be a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous space (VUCA-Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity). VUCA represents an analytical approach of the operational environment that attempts to distinguish between perception and knowledge. To keep up with these challenges of the operational environment, military forces must constantly adapt and develop their ability to promptly respond to unforeseen situations and to identify the gaps in the planning and execution of operations.

Also, many armies are currently looking for new concepts suitable for operations in urban areas, based on the lessons learned by the Ukrainian military forces. There is a need to adapt the doctrines of the armed forces, the technologies used in the urban environment assisted by artificial

intelligence and to adapt the training of the armed forces, especially of the land forces, to the challenges of the urban environment. The transformations of the operational environment also target the depth of the front. This characteristic of the battle space influences directly the capabilities used in battle, the size of the military forces and the tactics used in battle as well as the efficient management of the battle space.

The development of this concept can also be extended to the military field by training military forces jointly or even creating joint regional forces under the umbrella of legislation favorable to the evolution of cooperation in the military field in the medium and long term.

Strategic depth implies good cooperation between all the capabilities involved in an armed conflict and supporting military actions through a flexible and adapted logistical structure. The advantage of a territory that includes rivers, mountains and other natural or artificial obstacles significantly increases the defender's chances. The existence of communication routes and of railways in the battle space ensures the mobility of forces and creates the conditions for ensuring adequate and timely logistical support.

This military conflict also demonstrated the advantages of drones in a complex and hybrid operational environment, as they became smaller, more lethal, easier to operate, and available at relatively affordable prices to almost any adversary. The Russia-Ukraine conflict demonstrated that innovations in drone technology can change the balance of power and achieve positive asymmetry. Ukraine's ability to acquire drones and modify them in real time based on feedback, and to change the tactics to counter anti-drone systems proved crucial to its war effort.

In addition, given the transformations of the contemporary operating environment and the superior intellectual capacity combined with the experience of those who plan operations, atypical/irregular solutions can be identified in the challenges encountered

in the combat space and which do not fit into traditional doctrines, thus gaining advantages. The identification of original solutions based on professional experience and in-depth knowledge of the adversary's vulnerabilities can create the necessary

conditions for obtaining the desired final state of the conflict, using minimal forces and means with maximum results, which entitles us to state that it can be the "keystone" in the management of military conflicts, including the one in Ukraine.

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