

Dr Stepan Stepanenko – Written evidence (IUD0004)

Implications of the war in Ukraine for UK Defence Inquiry submission.

Organisation details: The Forum for Foreign Relations is a non-partisan think tank that focuses on bridging the gap between intellectual discourse and public engagement on foreign affairs. It promotes democracy, rule of law, and state sovereignty, and influences public policy through research, social media, podcasts, and events. It also addresses challenges from Russia, China, and Iran to democratic values.

Authors

Stepan Stepanenko is the director of research of the Forum for Foreign Relations, with prior experience of working in the UK think tank sector, with a focus on foreign affairs and national security.

Maj Gen (Rtd) John Holmes DSO OBE MC is a retired British Army Officer who spent the majority of his service with the SAS and who held all the principal commissioned appointments from Troop Commander to Director Special Forces. This included two years as the Special Forces Liaison Officer at the British embassy in Washington DC. During his career in the Army John earned awards for gallantry and leadership in Northern Ireland, Iraq and Sierra Leone.

- 1. What does the war in Ukraine tell us about the changing character of warfare? To what extent are the lessons from the war in Ukraine applicable to UK Defence**
2. While the UK is not currently anticipated to engage in a defensive war on its soil, the potential for deployment within the broader Eurasian continent remains an ever-present threat, heightened by the aggressive postures of Russia and China. The war in Ukraine underscores the paramount importance of rapid and comprehensive military responses, thus averting the risk of a drawn-out conflict which could severely strain UK resources and capabilities, also highlighting the ever present requirement of mass military deployment.
3. The Ukrainian experience vividly demonstrates how protracted conflicts can open the door to hybrid warfare tactics. These include the manipulation of public opinion through orchestrated campaigns across both social and traditional media platforms, designed to sow discord and undermine societal cohesion. The strategic use of these tactics by adversaries like Russia in Ukraine provides a clear lesson in the potential challenges facing the UK. It highlights the need for robust countermeasures including cyber defence, strategic communication capabilities, and public resilience initiatives, ensuring that the UK can effectively counteract and mitigate these non-conventional threats.
4. The financial and human costs associated with lengthy military engagements underscore the need for the UK to prioritise readiness and swift, decisive action in its defence posture. The lessons from Ukraine are stark reminders of the critical need for the UK to maintain a well-prepared and agile military force, capable of rapid deployment and high-intensity operations. This readiness will be essential not only for direct military engagements but also in deterring potential adversaries who may perceive protracted conflicts as opportunities to weaken UK and allied forces strategically.

5. Is there a need for the UK to increase investment in integrated air defence and missile defence in light of the war in Ukraine?

6. The war in Ukraine has highlighted the pivotal role of air and missile defence systems in modern warfare, particularly in countering rapid missile attacks on both military assets and critical civilian infrastructure. This new warfare dynamic underscores the urgent necessity for the United Kingdom to enhance its investment in integrated air and missile defence capabilities. Although the UK is not presently expected to defend its territory from such direct threats, the Ukrainian experience demonstrates the essential role of a robust, mobile, and well-resourced missile defence shield, which is not only vital for the protection of the UK but also crucial for safeguarding our allies, reflecting our commitments under NATO and other international partnerships.
7. The effectiveness of the UK's air defence system hinges significantly on its interoperability with systems operated by NATO allies. This capability ensures that in times of crisis, UK defence assets can seamlessly integrate with multinational defence mechanisms, enhancing the collective response efficacy and strategic adaptability of allied forces. Such interoperability is critical for maintaining a cohesive and unified defensive posture along NATO's borders, particularly in scenarios that mirror the threats observed in Ukraine.
8. Recent attacks on UK naval units and commercial shipping by terrorist groups in Yemen have revealed vulnerabilities that extend beyond traditional warfare, highlighting the increasing risks posed by low-cost drone and missile attacks on key supply lines. This evolving threat landscape necessitates an escalated focus on advancing missile defence systems aboard naval vessels. Enhancing these capabilities will provide a critical safeguard, ensuring the security of essential maritime routes and the protection of naval assets, which are crucial for maintaining the UK's global reach and ensuring uninterrupted logistical support in conflict scenarios. Countering tactical UAV attacks on ground forces and air force bases also has to be a priority for the UK's air defence investments.

9. To what extent should the UK seek to increase its weapon stocks as a result of the war in Ukraine? What kind of weapons should it focus on procuring in greater quantities?

10. Observations from the war in Ukraine underscore the necessity for the United Kingdom to reassess and significantly bolster its weapons stockpiles, considering the intense demands of contemporary combat scenarios. The daily expenditure of artillery shells in Ukraine, reported to be exceeding 6,000 rounds, provides a stark benchmark for the scale of ammunition required in high-intensity conflicts against formidable adversaries such as Russia and China.
11. Given this, the UK must ensure its stockpiles are capable of sustaining prolonged military engagements, necessitating stockpiles for months of operations at the Ukrainian intensity level of ammunition expenditure. This is imperative not only for immediate response capabilities but also for maintaining operational endurance over the potential course of extended warfare. The focus should particularly be on procuring an increased quantity of long-range precision missiles and advanced artillery systems. These weapon types have proven indispensable for achieving tactical overmatch on the battlefield, allowing forces to engage effectively at greater distances and with higher accuracy, thereby reducing the risk to personnel and increasing overall mission success rates.

12. Additionally, the concept of overmatch - having superior firing power to overwhelm the enemy - must extend to the development and stockpiling of more precise and more damaging ordnance. This would involve investing in next-generation technology that enhances the lethality and effectiveness of the British arsenal. While enhancing hardware capabilities is crucial, equal attention must be given to ensuring we have adequately trained personnel in sufficient numbers. The ability to deploy and effectively utilise these advanced weapons systems is fundamental. Therefore, alongside increasing our weapon stocks, the UK must also focus on expanding and enhancing the training of its armed forces to ensure they are fully prepared to employ these systems effectively against adversaries. The Territorial Army and Reserves must be trained in the operation of advanced high tech systems which they will be expected to use on the battlefield.

13. How can the UK Armed Forces update their training and exercises to incorporate the lessons from the war in Ukraine?

14. Extending NATO membership to Ukraine would significantly bolster the UK's combat readiness by facilitating closer military cooperation and integration. Through joint exercises with the Ukrainian army, British forces would gain invaluable firsthand exposure to the tactics and operational strategies honed by Ukraine in their ongoing war with Russia. This would not only enhance the practical combat capabilities of the UK armed forces but also deepen the strategic understanding of a potential adversary's methodologies, thereby strengthening the overall defensive posture of NATO and its member states.

15. Supporting Ukraine's inclusion in the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) presents a strategic advantage without the complications of a NATO Article 5 collective defence commitment. The JEF, designed for rapid deployment and versatile operations, stands to greatly benefit from the integration of Ukrainian military forces, renowned for their resilience and innovative combat tactics against a technologically superior adversary. The inclusion of Ukraine in the JEF would enable the UK and its allies to leverage these combat experiences, facilitating a richer exchange of knowledge and tactical acumen, thus enhancing the effectiveness of the force in a variety of operational contexts.

16. Permanent stationing of Ukrainian military personnel in NATO command structures would provide a direct conduit for the transfer of critical knowledge and experience in countering Russian military strategies. Ukrainian commanders have developed a robust understanding of Russian tactics through intense and prolonged engagement on the battlefield. By embedding these personnel within NATO's command posts, the alliance would significantly enhance its strategic planning capabilities and improve its readiness to respond to similar threats. This integration would be particularly beneficial for the UK, ensuring that our defence strategy is informed by the most current and relevant battlefield intelligence and experience.

17. How have drones been used by both sides in the war in Ukraine and what has been their impact for the way the war has been fought? What lessons should the UK Armed Forces draw from the use of drones in Ukraine?

18. Both Ukraine and Russia have used drones to great effect on the battlefield, with Ukraine actively compensating its lack of conventional artillery munitions through use of FPV (first person view) drones. Low cost and highly agile, they have proven to be an effective tool against armoured vehicles

and personnel. Effectiveness of drones is demonstrated by their rate of production, with Russia producing 300,000 units per month, as reported in November 2023¹, and Ukraine ramping up production to 150,000 per month, increasing from 50,000 in November 2023, with a view to produce 2 million FPV drones by the end of the current year, as reported in March 2024².

19. The Ukrainian long range drones have been credited with damaging Russian oil and oil refining facilities, although their effect remains limited when compared to targeted missile strikes. Drones are likely to impact a small area of the intended target, and in the case of oil refineries, do not destroy the entire production potential of the installation, allowing for rapid isolation of damage and repair³. Despite these shortcomings, it would be prudent for the UK to examine their operational use due to the lower comparative cost to conventional long range missiles. In the case of the Ukraine war, the long range Ukrainian strikes also have the added benefit of psychological warfare, by being able to reach deeper into Russia without the visible ability to construct long range weapons – a capability that is expected of the UK as a NATO member and prominent global economic power. Cost calculations also make it imperative for the UK to invest in procurement and development of Counter Unmanned Aircraft systems (CUAV) which reduce costs of air defence compared to current missile platforms. A necessity made visible by drone swarm attacks on Ukraine and Israel.

20. What role has the space domain, including satellite communications, played in the war in Ukraine, and how has this differed from previous conflicts? What are the implications for the UK Armed Forces?

21. Satellite communications have played a vital role in Ukraine's military ability to communicate and successfully target Russian forces, but their reliance on commercially available technology, chiefly the Starlink systems, has also been a hinderance. Claims of the Starlink system being turned off by the operator during critical missions⁴, and Russian operation of the same systems as late as April 2024 despite efforts to prevent this⁵.
22. The UK must ensure that its communication and targeting systems operate outside of external, including private and corporate, influence, ensuring continuous operation in battlefield environments. A prerequisite for this is the use of proprietary and government controlled and owned technologies, both in terms of hardware and software. Considering the cost of production and operation of such systems, and the potential danger to personnel life in case of cyberattacks, the risk of private or corporate operation is too high.

23. What lessons have the UK and NATO learned from the war in Ukraine about the management of escalation of force?

24. The war in Ukraine has provided critical insights into the management of escalation of force, highlighting significant challenges within NATO, and particularly for the UK. One of the key lessons is the inherent weakness in

¹ <https://bulgarianmilitary.com/2023/11/30/ukraine-produces-50000-fpv-drones-per-month-russia-300000/>

² <https://kyivindependent.com/deputy-minister-ukraine-can-produce-150-000-drones-per-month/>

³ <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/92132>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/sep/07/elon-musk-ordered-starlink-turned-off-ukraine-offensive-biography>; <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/09/12/7419424/>

⁵ <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/04/pentagon-working-with-ukraine-spacex-to-prevent-russian-exploitation-of-starlink/>

the self-enforcement of "red lines." These red lines, while intended to deter aggressive actions by setting clear boundaries, often constrain the Alliance's ability to respond effectively and promptly to emerging threats. This approach can mislead the public into perceiving a false sense of danger from actions that ultimately do not lead to definitive repercussions. The vague nature of these red lines can be manipulated or ignored by adversaries, undermining their intended deterrent effect.

25. For instance, the UK's hesitance to respond decisively to direct threats has been evident in several instances. A notable example, as reported, involved a near-miss incident where a Russian jet fired a missile near a British surveillance plane over the Black Sea⁶. This act of aggression occurred in international airspace, presenting a clear challenge to NATO's authority and the UK's security. The lack of a robust response to such provocations not only undermines NATO's credibility but also enhances perceptions of vulnerability within the Alliance, encouraging adversaries to escalate their aggressive postures.
26. Unenforced red lines and muted responses cultivate a narrative of weakness that adversaries are keen to exploit. This narrative emboldens hostile nations by signalling that the consequences of their actions will likely be limited, thereby encouraging further brinkmanship. To counter this, NATO, and particularly the UK, must reconsider its strategy concerning the management of escalation. Clearer, more actionable red lines should be established, along with credible commitments to enforcing them. This strategy would not only strengthen deterrence but also reassure member states and the public of NATO's capability and resolve to uphold international security and order.
- 27. Is the hybrid threat to the UK posed by Russia evolving as a result of the war in Ukraine, and if so, how?**
28. The war in Ukraine has shifted the use and appearance of Russian troll farms from utilising accounts with a richer back story, to less detailed and less labour intensive accounts, requiring less input to set up, in case of blocking. The Russians have also shifted the from using troll accounts for single narrative purposes and have increased their presence across the social media sphere, leaving comments relevant to the war in Ukraine on unrelated topics and threads, specifically relating to the conflicts in the Middle East and domestic matters of NATO states⁷.
29. Russia is utilising its troll farms not to merely influence the attitude towards the war in Ukraine among the population of NATO states but to generate a wider discontent and social disturbance, by promoting provocative, false and disruptive narratives on the Hamas terror group's attack on Israel on October 7th 2023. UK can seek to disrupt these operations by legislating additional verification steps for registered users on social media platforms, and limiting the exposure of accounts with frequent logins from IP addresses located in Russia, combined with a wider global campaign to legislate identity verification of social media account users.

⁶ <https://apnews.com/article/uk-russia-fighter-jet-missile-black-sea-7e6c04c10d1e6035d01c01ca595ccb6e>

⁷ <https://transparency.fb.com/sr/Q4-2023-Adversarial-threat-report> ; <https://graphika.com/reports/faltering-on-facebook-ignored-on-instagram>

30. Additional protection from Russian automated social media posts can be sought through controls over artificial intelligence generated content on social media posts and the, wider, across internet platforms.

31. What other lessons can we draw from the war in Ukraine for UK Defence? What are the implications for the UK's defence priorities, including manpower?

32. The current size of the British armed forces falls below the capacity of Wembley Stadium - a stark visualisation of UK's current limitations. This comparison becomes even more poignant when considering the scale of operations undertaken by potential adversaries such as Russia and China. These nations demonstrate a readiness and capacity for large-scale military engagements, which the UK must be prepared to match with a significantly enhanced force, both in terms of manpower and modern, capable hardware. Elevating Britain's military capabilities will not only bolster national security but also enhance the UK's standing among allies, particularly in light of past criticisms from figures such as President Trump regarding NATO members' defence commitments.

33. The war in Ukraine has vividly demonstrated the strategic necessity for a large, agile, and technologically advanced strike force capable of delivering rapid and decisive actions against enemy logistics and command centres. Without such capabilities, the UK risks being entangled in prolonged conflicts that it is ill-equipped to sustain under current force levels. The ability to project power swiftly and effectively is paramount in preventing extended warfare and in securing British interests and international obligations.

34. The UK should draw valuable lessons from Ukraine's use of conscription and the Scandinavian model of "total defence." These strategies emphasise the importance of broad societal engagement in defence readiness. For instance, initiating airsoft rifle clubs under the supervision of Army personnel could serve as a practical measure to familiarise the British public with basic weapon maintenance and operation. Additionally, promoting the Combined Cadet Force as a developmental club could help instil core skills such as leadership among teenagers, which will benefit them for life irrespective of career choice. These initiatives would not only enhance national resilience but also ensure that a larger segment of the population is prepared and capable of contributing to national defence in times of extreme crisis.

23 April 2024