

What the First Week of Fighting in Ukraine Tells Us About a Potential Insurgency

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While the Russian advance in Ukraine has been [slower than expected](#), its overwhelming [conventional superiority](#) gives it the upper hand. Despite the valiant resistance of many Ukrainians, Russia will probably conquer all or a portion of the country. However, the first week of the conflict *has* provided some useful information about the prospects for an insurgent campaign in the wake of a Russian occupation.

In the lead-up to the conflict, many [analysts](#) were [wary](#) of the potential for a successful Ukrainian insurgency following a Russian conventional victory. Given the course of the conflict so far, the prospects look less dire. Guerrilla wars are protracted and brutal so there will be no quick or easy resolution, but Ukrainian insurgents would likely operate with a territorial sanctuary in the west of the country, the assistance of strong external actors, and the support of a cohesive and united society. The following discussion covers the challenges and opportunities for such an insurgency.

Challenges

First, one of the best predictors of successful insurgent campaigns is the presence of “[rough terrain](#)” such as mountains, forests, or other topographical features. This allows insurgents to hide both themselves and supplies. In addition, it equalizes some of the inherent material advantages held by stronger counterinsurgents. Heavy equipment, supplies, and troops are harder to move quickly in such environments.

Ukraine does not provide such an [environment](#). In particular, eastern Ukraine is relatively flat and open, made up of plains. This would push insurgents into urban areas, which make it harder to hide, train, and re-supply. Though groups in Iraq and Afghanistan were able to operate in cities, it was tenuous and introduced [notable challenges](#). Moreover, Russia’s [approach](#) to urban operations has demonstrated that it is more willing to employ deadly force in urban environments than the US was in Iraq and Afghanistan. Note that the picture is [different](#) in western Ukraine where there are some mountainous regions and four bordering NATO countries (more on that below).

Second, insurgency is all about [information](#). Information is necessary to separate insurgents from civilians, allowing counterinsurgents to target fighters discriminately and to get the intelligence necessary to disassemble covert networks. When counterinsurgents use force indiscriminately, targeting civilians, they often [alienate](#) those individuals, and may even encourage them to join

the insurgent side. If they lose access to consistent information from civilians, they risk allowing insurgents to blend in – in other words, the fish remain safe in the sea, not separated from it.

In this case, the many [Russian-speaking](#) communities in eastern Ukraine would probably give Russia an added advantage in terms of access to information. If nothing else, it might make it harder for insurgents to recruit local fighters to counter Russian resistance. Compared to Iraq and Afghanistan where the US had a steep learning curve with respect to local networks and realities, [Russia has significant knowledge](#) of local populations.

Finally, [experience fighting](#) as an [insurgent](#) or counterinsurgent is beneficial. This experience, particularly given the inhibiting factors mentioned above, can help insurgents find ways to weaken and target much stronger foes without suffering extensive losses.

In this case, Ukrainians have little such [experience](#). Instead, they have been trained to fight conventionally. By contrast, Russia does have a non-trivial amount of counterinsurgent experience in [Chechnya](#) and [Syria](#). Unlike the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, Russia will not be forced to “re-learn” counterinsurgent tactics and strategy. On top of this, Russia has a large and relatively well-supplied [military](#) – it will have access to reinforcements, ammunition, artillery, and overwhelming close air support.

Opportunities

Despite all of these factors, counterinsurgency is still hard – as evidenced by the US failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. It requires a large troop presence to “pacify” local populations. The [conventional ratio of counterinsurgents](#) to local inhabitants needed for a successful counterinsurgent campaign is between 10 to 20 soldiers per 1,000 locals. Ukraine’s population is 44 million and Russia has deployed around 200,000 troops. This is a ratio of about 5 Russian soldiers for each 1,000 Ukrainians. While this ratio would be different if Russia only occupies eastern Ukraine, it still shows that Russia would have to supply a large coterie of troops for an extended period of time.

What is more, the past week of fighting has highlighted a set of factors that could notably weaken Russian counterinsurgent efforts and ameliorate some of the inherent challenges to guerrilla warfare discussed above. These are the cohesion (or lack thereof) of fighters on both sides, the real prospect of secure territorial sanctuary for insurgents in western Ukraine, and the growing signs that NATO countries will be willing to take real risks in supplying Ukrainian forces.

First, the prospect of consistent and reliable territorial sanctuary in western Ukraine is more likely now than it appeared even a week ago. [Territorial sanctuary](#) is often a major component of [successful insurgencies](#) as it gives fighters room to re-group, re-supply, and launch operations. Given the disposition of Russian troops, a partition of Ukraine seems increasingly plausible. If Ukrainian fighters had a clear sanctuary in the west, it would notably improve the prospects for a sustained guerrilla campaign. Rather than relying on neighboring countries for space to operate, Ukrainian fighters would have a base within their own territory. This would make it [easier](#) to coordinate with, and recruit from, local communities and networks, maintain diplomatic standing

abroad and legitimacy at home in eastern Ukraine, draw on domestic rather than international supply chains, launch cross-border drone or IED attacks, and more directly support covert resistance in Russian strongholds in the east of the country. On top of this, Western Ukraine has far more rough terrain, which would make it easier for insurgents to hide from Russian artillery and air attacks. Such a territorial sanctuary was a major advantage for insurgents during the Second Indochina War, who [could rely](#) on North Vietnam to support and coordinate operations in South Vietnam.

Second, Ukrainian troops and citizens have exhibited [notable cohesion](#) in the face of the Russian invasion. They have taken up arms, supported deployed fighters, shown strong social support for the standing government, and have united around a Ukrainian identity. Much research has shown that [cohesion](#) is [central to military success](#) and this is even more so in the disjointed, confusing, and violent reality that is civil war. [Cohesive forces](#) are less likely to [desert](#) in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, are more likely to [fight](#) and persist over the long arc of conflict, and are less likely to be won over by counterinsurgent attempts to buy them off.

By contrast, Russian forces [have not been cohesive](#). This is a result of being misled by their leaders, being undersupplied, and not showing any strong commitment to the cause of conquering Ukraine. Just as cohesion is a boon for insurgents, so too is its absence a liability to counterinsurgents. In such cases, [counterinsurgents](#) are less likely to be able to rely on their soldiers to use force in a strategic or discriminate manner. Not only does a lack of cohesion often promote the indiscriminate use of force and unwillingness to deploy to risky insurgent strongholds, but it increases the chance that deployed fighters will predate local populations, worsening the intelligence challenges introduced above.

Finally, [external support](#) is an important factor in [insurgent success](#). There is increasing [evidence](#) that [Western](#) nations are willing to provide [notable military support](#) to Ukraine despite the risks of Russian reprisals. This would allow Ukraine to retain consistent access to arms and supplies. In particular, the provision of person-portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons would be useful for insurgents making forays east. Of its neighbors, Poland has already been active in facilitating arms transfers. With an independent western Ukraine, bordering NATO members such as Poland, Hungary, and Romania could provide important strategic depth and allow insurgents to receive external training in a protected location.

Moreover, some Western nations have offered specialized training and, reportedly, there has already been an [influx](#) of foreign fighters. This could [help](#) to ameliorate some of the guerrilla warfare skills deficits noted above and provide Ukrainian insurgents with important tactical and strategic know-how. Beyond expertise, simple person-power matters: sustained combat operations require insurgents to constantly replace fallen fighters and maintain their numbers – the Islamic State [reportedly](#) lost over 50,000 fighters between 2014 and 2016. But, an influx of foreign fighters could also have a downside since they can [sow discord](#) and dilute the overall unity and commitment to cause of an insurgency. Given the current cohesion and morale of Ukrainian citizens, such dynamics could be costly over the long run.

Concluding Thoughts

While Ukraine is not an ideal location for a sustained guerrilla campaign, the first week of the conflict has revealed a slightly less hostile environment than might have been assumed. Such a campaign would likely drag Russia into an extended quagmire and hold out hope for a united Ukraine. That said, some quick concluding thoughts:

Guerrilla campaigns are long, violent, and costly – and are often not successful. Not only would there be significant loss of life, but such a conflict would likely come with major economic, social, and other human costs. Russia has shown itself to be a violent and brutal counterinsurgent in places like Chechnya and Syria – and its [indiscriminate use of force](#) in the past few days shows that its behavior in Ukraine will probably be no different. NATO supporters would also face increased costs due to potential Russian retribution.

More broadly, the images and videos coming out of Ukraine demonstrate the horror of war. While these visuals are provoking much consternation (and should), it's worth noting that substate conflict across the world is just as bloody. Civil wars in Africa, Asia, South America, and the Middle East produce the same terrible outcomes. As we have seen the past days, the severe costs of war anywhere should not be underestimated or swept aside.