

US Military Involvement in Ukraine: NATO Expansion Through Proxy War

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Introduction

Although the U.S. State Department's direct role in stoking the Maidan conflagration and toppling a democratically elected president is widely accepted as part of the historical record of the political and civil upheaval in Ukraine, little is reported about the initial and ever evolving U.S. military presence in the country. Former Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland's intercepted phone calls and former U.S. President Barrack Obama's public admission of the U.S. government's \$5 billion investment in funding fundamentally altering Ukraine's political, economic and cultural alignment in the world received coverage, even by western main stream media. What has not received extensive media scrutiny is the involvement of the U.S. military and CIA very early on, and increasingly since the civil strife in the country began.

Setting aside the wealth of research suggesting the presence of western-trained snipers on the Maidan that fateful February 20th, 2014, the then Director of the CIA John Brennan's visit to the new coup leadership just two months later in mid-April was a sign to the world that the U.S. clandestine intelligence services were fully involved in the unfolding drama. U.S. intelligence gathering aid was apparently on offer, yet soon proved to be of little help to the hapless Ukrainian defense establishment. The declaration by the Kiev government of an Anti-Terrorist Operation was a clear sign that the United States was behind the attempt to militarily confront the growing opposition in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Lugansk. Anyone refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of the coup government would be labelled a terrorist. The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) was given command of the operation, not the Ministry of Defense. Paradoxically what followed was a systematic campaign to terrorize and subjugate the rebellious population of two regions that had very real concerns and fears that their culture, interests, and welfare would not be embraced and protected by the new government that had seized power by force, and had even attempted to assassinate the deposed President Yanukovich, a president whom these dissenting regions had overwhelmingly voted for.

The U.S. Congress approved an aid package of \$1 billion to Ukraine in March of 2014, followed up by an additional \$53 million in non-lethal military aid later that same year. The European Union and International Monetary Fund had already given \$26 billion in financial aid to the ruling government in Ukraine. By the beginning of September of that year, the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) military offensive was roundly defeated, culminating in the encirclement battle of Ilovaisk. By April of 2015, the U.S. Congress approved a further \$75

million in military aid to the new Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko by passing the European Reassurance Initiative. The UAF tried a second time to settle the issue in the east by military means, launching their 2015 winter offensive to divide and conquer the proclaimed Donetsk Peoples Republic (DPR) and Lugansk Peoples Republic (LPR). This offensive ended in the disastrous Debaltseve encirclement. At this point, if the DPR and LPR militias had had adequate manpower, the entirety of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions could have been secured and the line of contact as it exists today would look quite different. During that winter's engagements, the rebels destroyed or recovered a number of U.S. supplies counter-battery radars, numerous HMMWV light utility vehicles, and a number of U.S. supplied small arms, sniper rifles and munitions.

After a year of successive and stunning defeats on the battlefield, the United States decided to embrace and push the Poroshenko propaganda excuse for Ukrainian defeat by stating that Russian regular military forces intervened in the conflict, engaging in a de-facto invasion of the country. Although totally unfounded; Russian volunteers and military advisers did aid the DPR/LPR forces and supplied them with arms and intelligence support, they did not inject regular military forces into the conflict. The same Russian military secured the strategically vital Crimean peninsula in 2014 while suffering no casualties, and facing no resistance from the UAF. It is highly improbable, and there exists no verifiable evidence, that Russian regular Army units took part in the devastating defeat meted out to the UAF in January of 2015. Evidence and truth mean little to the U.S. deep state, which ramped up the anti-Russian hysteria in all the political and media channels available. Beginning in February 2015, a month after the Battle of Debaltseve, the United States Army began planning the first of many deployments of U.S. Army soldiers to Ukraine with the stated aim of training the Ukrainian military and establishing a new military training center in the west of the country. In the intervening years, the U.S. Army, as well as the militaries of the UK and Canada have sent soldiers to Ukraine as trainers and advisers. Regular rotations of U.S. Army troops have been deployed for this purpose for three years now. Additional packages of military aid have continued unabated over the same time period. What started out as an operation to train members of the Ukrainian National Guard, has morphed into a much larger and concerted effort to train the Ukrainian Armed Forces as a whole, to successfully conduct offensive operations.

Preliminary Stated Goals and Deployments

The U.S. Army began its training mission with a small contingent of 300 troops of the 173rd Airborne Brigade based in Vicenza, Italy. Their deployment to the International Peace Keeping and Security Center at the Yavoriv training base in western Ukraine, not far from L'viv, occurred just 3 months after the battle of Debaltseve. The initial goal was to train four companies of the Ukrainian National Guard. As quoted by *Defense News* at the time, a Department of Defense spokeswoman named Lt. Col. Vanessa Hillman stated that the training was meant "to assist Ukraine in strengthening its law enforcement capabilities, conduct internal defense, and maintain rule of law."



The Yavoriv International Peace Keeping and Security Center located in the extreme west of Ukraine and the break-away republics of the Donbass in the extreme east.

The original stated intent of the U.S. Army's effort was to train battalion sized elements of the Ukrainian National Guard to increase law enforcement and civil defense capabilities. It

was not long before U.S. official announcements, main stream media and independent media coverage began to show U.S. soldiers training their Ukrainian counterparts in small unit tactics and the proper employment of small arms and light support weapons. This soon expanded to advising Ukrainian officers on effective command and control technics and processes, as well as successful combined arms warfare and asymmetric warfare technics to counter Russian “hybrid warfare” in use in Donbass.

So how has this mission changed in the intervening three years? Currently, the U.S. Army is now training brigade sized Ukrainian Army units with the help of trainers from other NATO countries including the United Kingdom, Canada, Poland and Lithuania. U.S. Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) has actively been training Ukrainian Spetsnaz as well, although this topic has received little media attention. The growing relationship between U.S. SOCEUR and Ukraine’s Special Operations Forces Command (SOFCOM) likely had its origins in the April 2016 meeting conducted between the heads of these respective commands, USAF Major General Gregory Lengyel and UAF Major General Ihor Lunyov. Ukrainian special operators have increasingly been seen training and conducting operations equipped with U.S. pattern uniforms and small arms.

An Unofficial Military Component of NATO

The U.S. Army mission to train battalion sized units of the Ukraine National Guard has grown into an operation to develop a Ukraine-led training center. At Yavoriv, 55-day training rotations conducted by U.S. Army units focus on the training of brigade-sized Ukraine Army units and bring them in line with NATO interoperability standards. The UAF as a whole is being transformed into a military that is 100% interoperable with all other NATO forces, regardless of the fact that Ukraine is not an official member of the NATO alliance. An interview conducted as part of an article posted by *Defense One* in October of 2017 with a spokesperson for the Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine, U.S. Army National Guard Captain Kayla Christopher makes this extremely clear:

“Every 55 days we have a new battalion come in and we train them...And at the end of that 55-day period, we’ll do a field training exercise with that battalion. But that’s not the real end state. Essentially, what we’re trying to do is get them to the point where they are running their own combat training center. Our overall goal is essentially to help the Ukrainian military become NATO-interoperable. So the more they have an opportunity to work with different countries — not just the U.S., but all their Slavic neighbors, and all the other Western European countries that come.”

Is this just another example of U.S. military “mission creep” or was it the intended mission from the outset? Despite the constant proclamations coming out of the U.S. State Department and the Pentagon that Russian aid to the Donbass militias is a violation of international law and has only fueled the conflict in the country, the U.S. seems to have no issue with doing the same thing. The United States is not a party to the Minsk II agreement, nor is it bound in any formal defensive treaties with Ukraine, and yet it is playing a growing part in the military conflict in that country. The mission has also morphed from an effort to increase the law enforcement and civil defense capabilities of the Ukrainian National Guard, a very uncontroversial and unprovocative sounding aim, into a mission to train the entire UAF into a force that can fight alongside NATO forces. All the training being conducted at the Yavoriv Combat Training Center can be employed by the UAF in either

defensive or offensive military operations.



U.S. instructors and Ukrainian Army soldiers review assault on defensive positions and clearing of trenches at the Yavoriv training center.

Capt. Kayla Christopher made it clear how the U.S. military views the Donbass Republics and why the Poroshenko regime labeled the initial attempt to take the rebellious oblasts by force as an anti-terrorism operation (ATO):

“They’re called anti-terrorism operations rather than something else because of the issue with the Russian-backed separatists. So they’re not really Russians, you know. They’re essentially terrorists.”

This is a revealing statement for a number of reasons. It reveals the U.S. origin of the initial use of the term ATO by Kiev, and the early influence of the U.S. over the new regime from the outset. It also refutes the often touted mantra that the UAF is fighting Russian military personnel directly in Donbass. Furthermore, while the message coming out of official U.S. diplomatic channels are in agreement with the guarantors of the Minsk-II agreement, that the only solution to the conflict is a peaceful, political one, the U.S. military has lumped all those that refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the Kiev government under the label of terrorists. This may just be the ignorance of one low level military officer on display, as another comment made by Capt. Christopher seems wholly disconnected from the bloody reality of the conflict and how it has effected all of Ukraine, most notably the civilians living in the breakaway regions whose only crime is the place they call home, and in most cases, their refusal to kneel to an illegitimate ruler:

“It’s actually pretty remarkable how little you feel the effect of the conflict on the western side of Ukraine. It’s almost as if nothing is happening...And if I didn’t work directly with soldiers every day, I don’t think you would really know. I mean, we see it on the news every day, and I work with soldiers every day. So we know about it. But you go out into Lviv, or any of the other big cities around this area and you really don’t feel the effects of there being war here.”

Such comments are either an attempt to distance the U.S. Army mission from the actual combat being conducted, or are a very real exhibition of just how disconnected from reality the U.S. military is in another failed “nation building” project. The brutal realities of this war are very clear to the civilians living in Donbass, who are subjected to indiscriminant artillery shelling by the UAF on a daily basis. The many families on both sides of the conflict who have lost loved ones could educate Capt. Christopher, and enlighten her as to just how real the war is.



Is this a terrorist that deserves to lose what little comfort and security she has in this world, or an innocent civilian caught between warring factions fighting over land she has called home her entire life?

Lethal Aid and a Growing U.S. Presence in the Region in General

U.S. weapons manufacturers have been providing the UAF with specialized small arms and sniper rifles chambered in NATO standard ammunition as well as non-standard high-powered rifle rounds. Russian equivalent rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) systems and projectiles manufactured in the U.S. have also been provided. Most recently, President Trump approved the sale of Javelin ATGMs to Kiev. The initial \$47 million sale consists of 210 missiles and 37 launch units. While some analysts see this more as a symbolic move meant to send a message to Russia that U.S. foreign policy under Trump is still one of containment of Russia, by expanding NATO right up to Russia's borders in every region, other see it as an initial "testing of the waters". Will Russia acquiesce to the sale or respond in kind by supplying the DPR/LPR with another high-tech weapon system? Regardless, Ukraine is becoming a de-facto NATO military camp, along with the Baltic States, Poland and Romania.



The FGM-148 Javelin ATGM is a fire-and-forget weapon with a reusable command launch unit (CLU). It is man-portable, although quite heavy at approximately 50lbs. (22.6 kg.). It can be used to attack in line-of-sight or "top attack" mode. It is a more complicated ATGM that requires added operator training to use.

Ukraine special operations forces have clearly undergone a transformation since U.S. military involvement in the country. UAF special operators more closely resemble those of NATO nations. They are now wearing U.S. military issue Operational Camouflage Pattern (OCP) "multicam" battle dress uniforms and gear, and are increasingly using western manufactured firearm accessories, optics, and night vision equipment. More notably, the UAF special operations units have adopted a number of small arms and sniper weapons systems that utilize NATO standard ammunition such as the 5.56x45mm intermediate rifle round and the 7.62x51mm rifle round. Sniper rifles chambered in .308 Winchester and .338 Lapua have also been adopted in limited numbers. Ukraine Special Forces, the SBU, and a number of airborne forces have adopted the Israeli Tavor TAR-21, built under license in Ukraine by the Fort firearms manufacturer. The Fort assault rifles have been manufactured and issued in both 5.45x39mm Russian caliber and 5.56x45mm NATO caliber. A contingent of 25th Airborne Brigade paratroopers were issued with Fort-21 assault rifles during the parade to celebrate Independence Day on August 24th, 2016.



Ukrainian Special Forces are being trained, equipped and armed by the U.S. to the point that they are hard to distinguish from their benefactors. It is also true that Russian Spetsnaz have followed a similar transformation, at least in the use of western tactical gear and firearms accessories.

A more alarming trend from the point of view of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MOD) is the growing presence of U.S. special operations soldiers on Russia's borders. The deployment of these highly trained operators has increased nearly 300% in just 11 years. According to a report published in *The Nation* in October of 2016, European deployments of U.S. special operations forces accounted for 3% of the total in 2006, increasing to 12% by 2017. These elite soldiers were deployed to nations all along Russia's Western and South Western borders, in countries such as Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, Georgia, and even Finland. Just as they have increased training regimens with Ukrainian special forces, they have increased inter-operability with special forces in many other European nations. In 2016 alone, U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM)

conducted no less than 37 Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) exercises on the European continent, with 18 such exercises in nations bordering Russia.

The message being send to the Russian MOD is clear. The United States is sending soldiers especially trained in asymmetrical warfare to its borders, and has increased cooperation and influence with peer forces in those same nations. Most of these nations had long been in Russia's sphere of influence. Operation Rapid Trident or similar training exercises have been held in Ukraine in some form or another since 1995, and have been attended by a growing list of NATO, NATO-aligned and non-NATO countries located on Russia's periphery in increasing number in recent years. It is not hard to image the U.S response to Russia deploying Spetsnaz forces in increasing numbers in training exercises in Canada, Mexico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. The hypocrisy is obvious when viewed in these terms. U.S. SOCOM deploys soldiers to roughly three quarters of the nations of the world over the course of a year, increasingly to nations bordering Russia and the continent of Africa, and yet NATO complains when Russia conducts military exercises within its own borders, or in conjunction with its global allies.



Canada, another NATO member, has been heavily invested in the inter-operability training from the very beginning. Canadian PM Justin Trudeau even visited the Yavoriv training center during an official state visit to Ukraine on July 12, 2016.

Conclusions

A brief study of U.S. military involvement in Ukraine reveals that it started before the Maidan, increased during the initial ATO, and continued to increase after the disastrous defeat of the UAF in the winter months of 2015, culminating in the Battle of Debaltseve. The U.S. government has been supplying the Ukrainian state with both non-lethal and lethal aid, military training and support, and crucial monetary support. The goal of making the Ukrainian Armed Forces a de-facto NATO inter-operable fighting component have been underway for three years now at an ever accelerating pace.

The Pentagon has clearly been tasked with tipping the military balance of power in Ukraine to the advantage of Petro Poroshenko's regime. The U.S. government is not a signatory of Minsk-II, nor do they have any apparent desire to see the conflict settled through dialogue and compromise. Regrettably, the U.S. State Department ceased to be a diplomatic service decades ago, and only acts to reinforce threats and coercion coming from the White House and the military industrial complex that directs it. There will be no peace, no compromise and no reconciliation in Ukraine as long as Uncle Sam is coddling a corrupt oligarch-made-ruler, and encouraging him to crush the "terrorists" in the east that he claims to represent as a democratically elected president. Unfortunately, he was not elected by the people of Donbass, as these regions were not included in the political process, nor were many of the political parties they may have voted for.

As witnessed in so many other conflicts, from Georgia to Syria, Russia has decide to be reactionary while the U.S. has decided to take the offensive initiative. There will undoubtedly come a time in the Ukraine conflict, as the U.S. continues to up the ante, when Russia will have to decide it its historic interests in Ukraine and Crimea are worth a wider conflict, or if it will allow its centuries-old connect to this region, its land and its people, slip away. The history of bloodshed and heroic sacrifice on the part of Russian soldiers to defend

and preserve this connection through a multitude of conflicts from the 14th century through the present should give U.S. political and military decision makers reason to re-evaluate their present course; however, imperial power and hubris recognize no limitations.

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