Reforming Ukraine’s Armed Forces while Facing Russia’s Aggression: the Triple Five Strategy

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Four years after Ukraine’s Euromaidan Revolution and Russia’s subsequent invasion, Minister of Defence General Stepan Poltorak outlines Kiev’s ambitious defence reforms, which aim to provide the armed forces with the capabilities needed to protect the country and to gain full interoperability with NATO.

On 21 November, Ukraine celebrated its Day of Dignity and Freedom to mark the fourth anniversary of the Euromaidan Revolution – also known as the Revolution of Dignity – that led to the overthrow of the regime of Viktor Yanukovych. This opened new prospects for Ukraine in terms of the development of its national identity and its return to a policy of European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

The return to Ukraine of the inherent right of every citizen to self-determination resulted in open armed aggression against the country by a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a signatory of the Budapest Memorandum: the Russian Federation.

The consequences of this aggression were tragic. Crimea was annexed, while Eastern Ukraine was invaded and reduced to rubble. Russia has captured over 43,000 square kilometres of our country. The three years of aggression have already resulted in the killing of more than 10,000 Ukrainians; a further 25,000 have been wounded.

The Armed Forces of Ukraine have lost 10,700 service personnel, including 2,340 killed in action. Since the beginning of 2017 alone, some 1,200 service personnel have been wounded in action and 170 killed.

Russia has established two army corps with a total manpower of around 39,000 within the temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine. The number of weapons and other equipment they possess (3,800 pieces) significantly exceeds that of most Western European countries, and includes 700 main battle tanks, 1,300 armoured fighting vehicles and 1,184 artillery pieces, of which 295 are multiple launch rocket systems. Full command and support of these army corps is exercised by the Russian Federation.

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At the same time, Russia continues to increase the size of its forces both along its international borders with Ukraine, where 25,000 service personnel are now stationed, and in Crimea, where the number of Russian forces has been increased to more than 31,000.

The Kremlin is also continuing to apply the full spectrum of hybrid war components against our country, including: regular terrorist acts and subversive activity within the territory of Ukraine; anti-Ukraine propaganda to discredit Ukrainian authorities; the takeover of Ukrainian enterprises; the moving of high-tech industrial equipment to Russia; the recognition of passports for those living in para-states; and the introduction of Russian currency to undermine the national economy of Ukraine.

The risk of full-scale aggression on the part of Russia remains high. Its complete disregard for international law and its demonstration of military power, together with its open use of brutal force, pose a direct threat to European and international security systems. The Kremlin continues to openly ignore international standards – undermining the existing world order – in order to restore its status as a global player. In this context, the Armed Forces of Ukraine play a key role in ensuring national sovereignty and independence, as well as deterring Russia’s ambitions on the eastern flank of Europe.

It is evident that one of the major factors that triggered Russia’s armed aggression was the weakness of Ukraine’s security and defence sector, particularly its armed forces. When Russia started its aggression in 2014, Ukraine had practically no armed forces. At that time, we could count on only 5,000–6,000 combat-ready service personnel.

The assistance coming from the true patriots of our society and our international partners, as well as the mobilisation of all our national resources, allowed us to restore the armed forces and initiate the process of radical reforms. These, in their scope and ambition, are unprecedented in the history of independent Ukraine.

The main goal of the reform is to provide the Armed Forces of Ukraine with the capabilities they need to ensure the country’s national defence and to
gain full interoperability with the armed forces of NATO. The main challenge of this reform is its implementation, which is taking place under conditions of hybrid warfare being waged by Russia.

The reform of the Ukrainian Armed Forces currently follows the so-called Triple Five Strategy. There are three major elements (solid foundation, clear strategic goals and key priorities), each of which is based on five components.

1. A Solid Foundation for Defence Reform

The first element of the Triple Five Strategy was the establishment of a foundation for defence reform, thus allowing the initiation of planning and the implementation of reform activities within a short period of time. It required the following steps to be taken.

First, the national leadership identified defence reform as the major priority of the foreign and domestic policy of Ukraine, which ensured extensive support for the reform process at all levels of government.

Second, a successfully completed comprehensive review of the security and defence sector allowed us to develop a full spectrum of defence planning documents.

Third, these defence planning documents allowed us to develop a single approach to the implementation of defence reform. This single approach involved three main entities: Ukraine’s President, its Cabinet of Ministers and its Ministry of Defence. The President of Ukraine has control over the implementation of; the Strategy for Sustainable Development ‘Ukraine 2020’; the Military Doctrine of Ukraine; the Concept for Development of the Security and Defence Sector; the Strategic Defence Bulletin; and the State Program for the Development of the Armed Forces of Ukraine until 2020. The Cabinet of Ministers are responsible for implementing the Action Program of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine and the Medium-Term Action Plan until 2020. And the Ministry of Defence is responsible for the fulfilment of the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Defence Reform in 2016–2020.

The fourth step that was taken to ensure a foundation for defence reform was to allocate the maximum available funding in support of the reform process, taking into account the current
The first priority is to ensure a financial and economic situation inside the country. The level of funding for the security and defence sector is secured in legislation at 5% of GDP, including 3% to be spent exclusively on defence.

The fifth step was to ensure that the defence reform process engaged not only with the representatives of national power or the members of the security and defence sector, but also with wider sections of civil society, including volunteers and civil society organisations, as well as advisers and experts representing partner countries and international organisations. Taken together, this allowed us to ensure effective civil control over the reform process and its implementation.

2. Clear Strategic Goals

The second element of the Triple Five reform strategy is all about having clear strategic goals. The Strategic Defence Bulletin – which is a roadmap for reform – identifies a total of five goals.

First, there should be joint command and control over the defence forces, based on NATO standards and principles. This provides for a legally established range of command authorities over the defence forces, the avoidance of duplication in functions of the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff, and the delineation of policymaking and policy implementation functions.

The third goal is for the operational capabilities of the defence forces to be sufficient to repel an armed aggression.

Second, there should be effective policy as well as planning and resource management systems based on modern Euro-Atlantic approaches. This provides for: the coordination of defence budget planning, taking into account the level of social and economic development of the country and planning within the security and defence sector; the introduction of a rational distribution of spending on the sustainment of forces, operational needs and combat training, refurbishment and the procurement of weapons and equipment; and the disposal of functions that are not relevant to the Ministry of Defence.

The third goal is for the operational capabilities of the defence forces to be sufficient to repel an armed aggression. This entails further development of policy documents on the training and employment of forces, the introduction of the joint training process and the optimisation of organisational structures and forces, as well as more capabilities for Special Operations forces, further development of the military intelligence system, the revival of the navy and the establishment of a military police.

The fourth priority is the re-armament of all the components of the defence forces. This entails an increase in the production capacity of defence industry enterprises, the introduction of Western technical standards and the establishment of cooperation with the international producers of the best weapons and military equipment.

3. Key Priorities

The third and final element of the reform strategy lies in the identification of key priorities – or ‘strategic enablers’ – that require special concentration of effort. There are five of these as well.

The first priority is to ensure a well-considered personnel policy. Such a policy should focus on the retention of service personnel with combat experience, the establishment of an NCO corps, the reinforcement of the officer corps and the increase in social protection for service personnel and members of their families.

The second priority is to ensure a balanced approach to the use of financial and material resources. A balanced approach should provide for the systemic implementation of the capability-based defence planning process, increased control over the targeted and effective use of financial resources, and the optimal use of resources provided through international assistance.

The third priority is to fulfil NATO membership criteria. This requires the concentration of efforts designed to ensure full interoperability of the Armed Forces of Ukraine with the armed forces of NATO member states.

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Fulfilling NATO membership criteria is a key priority for Ukraine.

The fifth and final priority is the development of a defence infrastructure capable of supporting an adequate and timely response to existing and potential military threats from all directions, a rapid deployment of forces in the most challenging operational directions to repel enemy aggression, and the construction of modern encampments, primarily in the east and south of Ukraine.

The Results So Far

We have already seen some positive results coming out of the implementation of the Triple Five Strategy. First, and most importantly, we have prepared a pool of experienced human resources. The total manpower of the Armed Forces of Ukraine is now 250,000, with an additional 130,000 as an operational reserve.
A British officer (left) and a Ukrainian paratrooper attend a special ceremony in Ukraine, 21 November 2017. Ukraine wants to further its defence cooperation with the UK. Image courtesy of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine.
Second, the comprehensive review of the security and defence sector produced an unbiased assessment of its components and resulted in the drafting of strategic documents.

Third, the Committee for Reforms of the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces was established to manage the processes under the defence reform. It consists of: representatives from the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine and other central executive authorities; representatives from the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other components of the defence forces; advisers from NATO member nations; members of the Ukrainian parliament; and volunteers and representatives of civil society organisations. Indeed, an effective mechanism for democratic civilian oversight over the whole of the reform process has been implemented.

Kiev is ready to establish all the necessary conditions for the deployment of a UN mission to the occupied territories of Ukraine

The fourth positive result of the Triple Five reforms is that modern defence planning procedures – including capability-based planning – are now in use, in coordination with NATO member nations, thereby reinforcing our defence capabilities. As part of this, the structure, functions, objectives and personnel of the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces went through an optimisation process, which also resulted in the establishment of the Joint Operational Headquarters.

Fifth, the experience of combat operations in the Anti-Terrorist Operation zone (ATO) has provided for the establishment of new armed branches – the Special Operations Forces and the Air Assault Forces – as part of the armed services of the Ukrainian army. The manpower of these units has doubled, and their high level of training and interoperability have been well demonstrated in the course of combat operations in the ATO zone.

New training approaches are also being implemented, based on NATO standards, and the motivation to sign up for military service has increased significantly.

Ukraine, the UN and the UK

We recognise that the support of the international community plays a key role in protecting the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Ukraine. In this respect, we rely on the further reinforcement of political and diplomatic pressure on the Russian Federation to stop its aggression against Ukraine and to proceed to a peaceful settlement of the situation in the east of our country. Such a settlement requires a qualitatively new solution: the deployment of a full-scale international peacekeeping operation, under the auspices of the UN, to the occupied territories of Ukraine. Kiev is ready to establish all the necessary conditions for such a deployment.

A full-scale UN mission in the area should have a mandate to operate over the entire temporarily occupied territory, with international control established over the part of the Ukraine–Russia state border which is within the conflict zone. The UN mission should require that all illegal armed groups and Russian regular forces should be withdrawn from the territory of Ukraine, and should establish control over the storage of heavy weapon systems to prevent their distribution and employment. Russia should not be a part of this proposed UN mission. Ukraine would rely on unconditional support for these provisions from all of our partners.

The UK continues to provide advisory and training assistance on a strategic and tactical level

We also count on the further development of defence cooperation with European countries, particularly the UK. The UK government has consistently supported our reform efforts since the start of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, with the total worth of material and technical assistance provided to the Armed Forces of Ukraine by the UK exceeding £5 million. In addition, the UK continues to provide advisory and training assistance on a strategic and tactical level. Its advisers are assigned to Ukraine’s Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces of Ukraine, while an additional 100 British instructors are engaged in training Ukraine’s armed forces; they have already trained more than 5,000 service personnel. Moreover, some of the Ukrainian military have been sent to the specialised and language training courses in the UK and Ukraine, while cadets have been offered the possibility of joining the service academies of the British Armed Forces.

Acquiring full membership of NATO is the only way for Ukraine to secure its sovereignty and independence

Despite these achievements, there are many opportunities for the further development of UK–Ukraine bilateral relations, especially in the field of countering Russia’s aggression and reinforcing security on the European continent. It is only through united efforts, joined by our partners from NATO, that we will be able to stop an aggressor.

Acquiring full membership of NATO is the only way for Ukraine to secure its sovereignty and independence. We hope that NATO takes steps to aid this goal and that practical support is given to our aspirations by NATO’s member states. Actions taken now will determine not just the future of Ukraine in Europe, but the future of the international security system and the unity of Europe.

General Stepan Poltork
Minister of Defence of Ukraine