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The Russia-Ukraine War: Lessons for Northeast Asia

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SYNOPSIS

While the warfighting experience in the war in Ukraine is unique and thus limits generalisation, there are notable aspects that may be transferable to potential flashpoints and militaries in other regions, particularly East Asia.

COMMENTARY

Since the start of the Russian offensive in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, military analysts and strategic thinkers have tried to ascertain potential lessons from the war. Much of the discussion, however, has been limited to Western and Russian contexts, with implications for the future of East Asian armies nearly absent.

Yet, regional defence planners in East Asia must ask how might lessons from the Russo-Ukrainian war manifest themselves in terms of military competitions as they affect the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait? Are there specific lessons that militaries in Northeast and Southeast Asia might draw from the Russo-Ukrainian war in terms of future defence modernisation and transformation plans?

The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine has exploded many myths, perhaps none more than the myth that, over the past decade or so, Russia has successfully transformed and modernised its armed forces. However, neither the Russian nor the Ukrainian armed forces have shown the capability for conducting combined arms operations — the effective integration and coordinated use of different military platforms, systems, and general capabilities in military operations — on a large scale.

Many other aspects of the conflict have defied preconceived notions and expectations. These include: the critical role of Russian intelligence failures at the beginning of the war; the importance of Western countermeasures targeting Russian information operations; the failure of the Russian concept of mobile attack echelons with helicopter-borne troops; the key role of preserving Ukrainian air defence systems in denying Russia air superiority; the impact of international cooperative cyber defence; the corrosive effect of the Russian military leadership and the lack of a flexible chain of command; low morale among Russian troops; and shortages of Russian manpower and poor logistics coordination.

Two developments have shaped the battlefield in Ukraine — the proliferation and availability of combat drones for longer-range, more sophisticated operations and the possession of thousands of inexpensive tactical drones for close-support operations. These enabled persistent observation of adversary positions, movements, manoeuvres, and combat. Both sides now assume that quadcopters for tactical support are “everywhere”, necessitating a change in ground combat tactics, manoeuvring and camouflage.

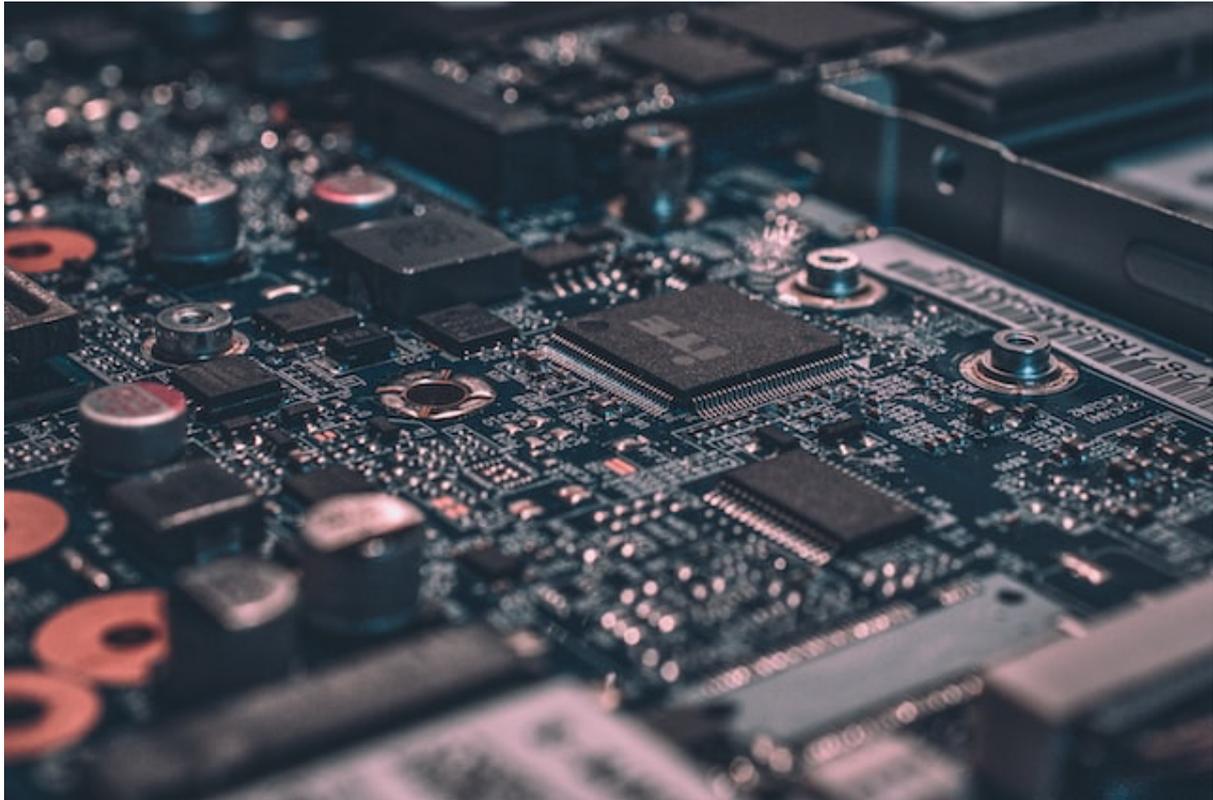
Meanwhile, Russia’s use of precision-guided missiles and self-detonating drones against Ukrainian critical infrastructure and military targets has overshadowed the role of cyber operations, bringing into question the utility of offensive cyber operations in full-scale wars. While cyber options remain a potent method to shape a conflict or infiltrate the opposing side, they are limited in their ability to alter the dynamics of a conventional war, so far.

Perhaps most importantly, the war in Ukraine has shown battlefield fluidity — how in a protracted war of attrition forces on different portions of the same battlefield operate within different generations of warfare at the same time.

Wake-up Call for Asian Armies

In this context, one of the main lessons from the war in Ukraine is that “Nintendo Armies” — armies that are fixated on high-tech weapons — do not matter in real wars. While the attention in many armies in East Asia, including South Korea and Japan, is on advanced technological development and acquisition, modern military technologies alone cannot guarantee operational success. In other words, the complexity of 21st century warfare, characterised by unprecedented fluidity, unparalleled intelligence challenges, overwhelming fire power, multidimensional frictions and intense geopolitical pressures, cannot be fully experienced through combat simulations.

On the Korean peninsula, for example, the Republic of Korea (ROK) forces, in conjunction with the US Forces Korea (USFK), have focused on deterring a major conventional war through high-tech weapons platforms and systems. However, the realities of kinetic wars, with immense suffering and massive destruction, as shown in Ukraine, can never be replicated in a computer screen, tabletop exercises, or command-post drills.



Cutting edge technologies are necessary, but they cannot supersede the harsh realities of war, and therefore should never be seen by strategic planners as a guarantee of victory. [Image](#) by Alexander Debieve on *Unsplash*.

Accordingly, defence planners in South Korea and Japan will have to rethink their entire defence postures, focusing not only on the acquisition of high-tech military platforms and systems for deterrence, but more importantly, on leadership and the will to fight in complex and contested regional environments that include the involvement of major powers, including China and Russia. For example, they must increasingly consider the interconnectivity of conflicts in East Asia, and their potential involvement and support in contingencies beyond their borders, such as potential crises in the Taiwan Straits, East China Sea or the South China Sea.

The Rise of a “Eurasian Threat-Belt”

At its core, the war in Ukraine demonstrates that hegemonic powers may resort to military aggression to change the status quo by force or to other forms of coercion, particularly in the context of intensifying regional strategic competition undergirded by a legacy of unresolved historical conflicts. As such, the war in Ukraine brings important geopolitical ramifications for East Asia and Europe — it links Russia, Iran, China and North Korea into a major Eurasian threat-belt. While the four Eurasian powers have different strategic interests, they are unified against the West and possess significant, albeit varying, military capabilities.

If the West and its allies are to oppose the nations of this new threat-belt, then a new “trilateralism” aligning the United States, NATO and the democratic nations in the Indo-Pacific, specifically Australia, Japan and South Korea, is essential, and it must be empowered by effective leadership and a will to fight.

Unlike in Western Europe, there is no collective security mechanism like NATO in East Asia. It has been customary to ensure regional security through bilateral alliances with the United States, known as the “hub and spokes” security framework, and defence efforts by each country in the region. There may be attempts to link existing regional security frameworks such as the Quad, AUKUS, Five Eyes, and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative in a multi-layered manner to provide security equivalent to collective defence, but the realisation of this idea still requires time and effort.

Drawing on the lessons of the invasion of Ukraine, there is an urgent need for stronger and more active multilateral cooperation between NATO and the Asia-Pacific four (South Korea, Japan, Australia and the United States). This can be achieved through a further strengthening of regional frameworks for multilateral security and defence cooperation, including intelligence sharing, defence collaboration and coordination, defence technology cooperation, joint weapons development, and bilateral arms sales.

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This is the first of two papers based on presentations and discussions held during a workshop organised by the Military Transformations Programme titled “Future Conflicts — Lessons Learned from Ukraine”. The workshop was focused on the strategic and operational implications of the Russo-Ukrainian war for militaries in the Asia-Pacific and how it might shape the character of future conflict in the 21st century, particularly, how the war is changing attitudes towards forms of modern warfare, emerging technologies, and defence innovation, what lessons countries in the region might draw from this conflict, and how they might subsequently reorient their militaries in preparation for likely future wars.