

Drones and Ukrainian resolve are proving to be a winning formula

Vasyl Myroshnychenko is the Ukraine ambassador to Australia, June 09, 2026

While the world's attention has been fixed on the [war in the Middle East](#), the war against Ukraine has changed. Specifically, in recent months and even as Kyiv comes under regular attack, Ukraine has reclaimed the military initiative and [regained the strategic and operational momentum](#) against Russia's unilateral invasion. This, in turn, may bode well for the war's ultimate end.

Let us look first at the facts on the ground. For the first time since 2024, Ukraine has been retaking occupied territory. According to analyses based on Institute for the Study of War battlefield mapping, Ukraine achieved a net territorial gain of about 260 square kilometres last month, as well as gains in April. These are the first months since August 2024 in which Russian forces suffered net territorial losses in Ukraine.

Why this is particularly significant is that it comes in the midst of a spring offensive on the part of the Russian side – an offensive that has ground to a decisive halt.

And it matters because Russia's core strategy has been one of slow, grinding advances through manpower and artillery superiority. As those gains flatten while casualties remain extremely high, advantage begins to shift.

Second, and reflecting the bloody reality of armed conflict, Ukraine has for the past six months neutralised more Russian combatants than Russia can monthly recruit. In April alone, some 35,000 Russian troops were killed or seriously wounded – that is numerically higher than Russia's monthly mobilisation target.

Russia increasingly relies on small infiltration squads, penal recruits, poorly trained contract troops and attritional infantry assaults rather than mechanised breakthroughs. This brutal reality is likely to be having a psychological impact not only among servicemen, but their families and other connections in Mother Russia.

Third, and in line with the changing nature of 21st-century combat, [Ukraine's long-range drone campaign has dramatically expanded](#). Attacks are at near record highs – some 225 in the past 18 months.

Ukraine's successful long-range drone strikes against Russia included an oil pumping station more than 1000km from the frontlines. Picture: @zelenskyyUa/X

A critical component of the drone campaign has been the targeting of Russia's oil production capacity – as oil is what funds Russia's aggression. Reuters reported in March that Ukrainian drone attacks, pipeline disruptions and related incidents had temporarily halted about 40 per cent of Russia's oil export capacity at the peak of the disruption. Separate assessments cited by analysts and Reuters reporting indicate Ukrainian strikes have damaged or forced offline about 20 per cent of Russia's oil refining capacity since early 2024, with some periods reaching much higher temporary outages.

At the same time, Ukraine is striking deeper inside Russia. In the most recent attack last week, Ukraine [struck energy and industrial targets near St Petersburg](#), some 1000km from the border. International media also reported recent attacks connected to the Orsknefteorgsintez refinery area, one of Russia's largest.

This is strategically important because Ukraine is increasingly able to impose economic costs on Russia, threaten military aviation and logistics, create insecurity far from the battlefield, and force Russia to divert air defences away from the front. Moreover, attacks on St Petersburg and Moscow expose Russians to the reality of a war largely hidden from them by state-controlled media.

Indeed, it is interesting to note that Russia's geographical size – historically a strategic advantage – is being used against it, as its air defences cannot cover the required territory. In contemporary terms, rear-area vulnerability matters more than trench warfare.

Fourth, Ukraine is adapting faster technologically. Specifically, Ukraine is innovating more rapidly than Russia in drone warfare, drone interception systems or electronic warfare, robotic ground systems and battlefield data integration, including the extensive use of AI models. Now the world's largest manufacturer of drones, Ukraine looks to produce some seven million this year.

Ukrainian air defence firing at Russian drones above Kyiv during a Russian drone and missile strike on the Ukrainian capital in May. Picture: Sergei Supinsky / AFP

Ukraine's methods of rapid experimentation and decentralised innovation are being studied by all its allies, including Australia. Russia, on the other hand, is hamstrung in its own adaptability by its corrupt, centralised and kleptocratic economic structure.

(In this respect, Ukraine continues to offer Australia its co-operation and partnership – including in the area of drones and AI – as Australia continues to modernise its defence strategy.)

As a result of these combined developments – battlefield attrition, deep strikes and technological adaptation – Russia is showing signs of strategic strain. This ranges from the de facto cancelling of this year’s Kremlin Victory Parade to Vladimir Putin increasingly taking to his many bunkers to Russia’s growing economic woes. For the first time, some of the Kremlin’s rhetoric about the endgame of the war has started to shift.

Having had some 15 of its ceasefire proposals rejected or ignored by Putin, including President Volodymyr Zelensky’s direct letter of appeal last week, Ukraine welcomes any greater willingness by Russia to negotiate in real terms – regardless of motivation. No one wants the war to end more than the Ukrainian people, but they also have a steely recognition that they may have to force Russia to the negotiating table. And that is what they look to be successfully doing.