Exporting Ukraine's Lessons: The Risks of Transferring the Wrong Lessons to the Asia-Pacific

By
Andrey Koval

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Having observed the war from within the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, one is struck by two simultaneous situations: the extraordinary tactical adaptation that has allowed a smaller force to impose costs on a larger adversary, and the enormous human price of that adaptation. Cheap mass-produced drones, systematic strikes on rear-area energy and logistics nodes, and resilient electronic-warfare improvisation have become signature features of the conflict. It is therefore unsurprising that defense establishments across the Asia-Pacific are studying these methods closely. Some are already exploring technology transfers, joint production, and informal tactical exchanges. The question is not whether Ukraine's experience offers useful lessons. It does. The question is which lessons translate to other regions, and which do not, and what unintended consequences may arise from transferring them to a fundamentally different operational environment.

Three lessons that worked in Ukraine, and why.

Three groups of practice stand out. First is the mass employment of low-cost, attritable drone vehicles for both reconnaissance and strike. In the Ukrainian theater, these systems succeeded because the battlespace is largely contiguous land, the front is relatively static for extended periods, and the adversary's logistics and energy infrastructure sit within the practical range of short- and medium-range platforms. The density of targets and the ability to generate volume of fire turned cheap drones into a force multiplier.

Second is the systematic pressure on the adversary's rear-area energy and logistics architecture. Ukrainian deep strikes have forced Russia to disperse resources, harden facilities, and divert air-defense assets. This worked because the continental geography allows relatively predictable lines of communication and because both sides share a common, dense rail and pipeline network that can be interdicted from land-based or short-range launch platforms.

Third is the rapid tactical adaptation in electronic warfare and counter-drone techniques. The constant cycle of measure and countermeasure has been possible because the electromagnetic environment is contested but not dominated by a peer-level, integrated air-and-missile defense system of the scale that a major maritime power can deploy.

Why do the same methods not transfer cleanly?

The Asia-Pacific is not a larger version of Donbas. It is a predominantly maritime theater characterized by vast distances, limited basing options, complex littoral environments, and dense civilian maritime traffic. Range and basing become decisive. Many of the Ukrainian systems that have proved effective operate at ranges of tens to a few hundred kilometers. In the Western Pacific, relevant distances are often measured in thousands of kilometers.

Launch platforms, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) coverage, communications pathways, and logistics chains that function on a contiguous landmass

become fragile or unavailable when forces must reliably operate from dispersed islands, at sea, from

space, or under the threat of long-range precision strike. Space, sea, and air control further change the equation.

In Ukraine, neither side has achieved lasting air superiority, yet both can still generate a significant volume of drone and missile strikes. In a high-intensity contingency involving a peer competitor, the side that can contest or deny sea and air control will determine whether low-cost attritable systems can even reach their intended targets in useful numbers. Technologies refined for a land war of attrition may therefore support deep attack, interdiction, or reconnaissance far more effectively than they support prolonged attrition.

Geography also influences the humanitarian assessment. Persistent attacks on energy and logistics facilities in the South China Sea or near key regional ports would directly impact global shipping routes and heavily populated coastal cities. Several Southeast Asian nations have limited backup capacity in their power supplies and ports. The civilian suffering, which has been tragic yet confined in Ukraine, could quickly expand to affect the entire region and cause severe economic damage.

The danger of learning the wrong lessons.

The most serious risk is not the transfer of technology itself, but the transfer of the wrong conceptual framework. Technologies developed or refined during an attritional struggle are not inherently attritional in their application. The same drones and electronic-warfare systems that have helped Ukraine impose costs on Russia can equally enable deep strike, maneuver support, reconnaissance-strike complexes, or anti-access/area-denial postures in the Indo-Pacific theatre. However, treating them primarily as tools of attrition risks encouraging operational concepts that are mismatched to the theater. Nor does the mere existence of offensive utility automatically lower the threshold for conflict.

For states, the incentives created by these unmanned systems depend on the broader balance of power, alliance structures, and escalation dynamics. For non-state actors, such as insurgent groups, criminal networks, or proxies operating in areas such as the Sulu Sea or the Myanmar borderlands, the same low-cost systems can lower barriers to violence and complicate state responses. Conflating the two sets of incentives weakens the analysis.

A more careful approach.

The lessons learned by our Asia-Pacific partners regarding Ukraine should continue, but it must be selective. Priority should be given to capabilities that strengthen deterrence and resilience without incentivizing pre-emptive or escalatory use. For example, improved ISR, defensive counter-drone systems, secure communications, and logistics concepts adapted to maritime distances all help achieve this. Any technology transfer should be accompanied by explicit proliferation safeguards and by joint work on civilian-protection frameworks suited to both littoral and midocean environments.

Ukraine’s experience is a valuable, hard-won body of knowledge. It is not, however, a ready-made playbook for the Western Pacific. Ukraine's greatest contribution to regional stability is not exporting its wartime model of attrition but helping partners distinguish the lessons that translate from those that do not and applying the right technologies in the right operational context. The Asia-Pacific theater does not need another protracted war of attrition. It needs approaches that reinforce deterrence and minimize the risk of catastrophic escalation. That goal is achievable, but only if the lessons of Ukraine are studied with the same clarity and caution that the war itself has demanded.

Andrey Koval is a defense planner focused on military effectiveness and long-duration conflict. The views expressed in this article are the author’s own.