New American

Written by **Luis Miguel** on January 19, 2024

Ukraine Uses Drone Strikes and Hacking as War with Russia Intensifies

Ukraine is stepping up its use of unconventional warfare, utilizing a combination of drone strikes and cyberattacks in its counteroffensive against Russia.

As CNBC reported, Ukraine hit the Russian city of St. Petersburg, the nation's second largest city, with a drone attack. Ukraine's minister of strategic industries, Oleksandr Kamyshin, acknowledged at the World Economic Forum in Davos that Kiev carried out the attacks, which had been publicized by Russian media.

AP Images
Damaged oil facility in Klintsy

The strike against St. Petersburg was one of several drone attacks launched simultaneously by Ukraine, with the targets primarily being oil depots. The Russian military took down the drone sent against St. Petersburg, causing its wreckage to land on the premises of the St. Petersburg Oil Terminal at the southern edge of the city.

Russian military personnel also took down a drone in the western town of Klintsy by electronically jamming it, but the drone dropped its explosive payload on the oil facility, causing a fire. Bryansk regional Governor Alexander Bogomaz said there were no casualties.

The Ukrainian military said this week that its air force shot down an important Russian spy plane.

Business Insider noted:

> Kyiv said that on Sunday, it destroyed a prized Russian A-50 radar early-warning plane, along with an Ilyushin Il-22 airborne command post, amid Moscow's grinding, nearly two-year war with Ukraine.
>
> British intelligence said Friday that a Russian A-50 "almost certainly exploded and subsequently crashed into the Sea of Azov," which is more than 50 miles into Russian-held territory and away from the front lines of the war.
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> The Defense Ministry added that despite no official position from Russia on the loss of the A-50, this strategy "likely demonstrates a tacit Russian acknowledgment of a successful targeting operation by the Ukrainians against a high value air asset."

Kiev has also used hacking to obtain key intelligence. One hacking group with ties to Ukraine's primary spy agency obtained construction plans for over 500 Russian military sites. Known as "Blackjack," the

group successfully accessed a Russian state enterprise engaged in construction projects for the Russian military. This cybersecurity endeavor resulted in the acquisition of over 1.2 terabytes of classified data.

Included within that data are maps of over 500 Russian military bases throughout Russia and Russian-occupied regions of Ukraine, such as air defense installations, weapons arsenals, and even the Russian Army's headquarters.

The stolen data came from seven Russian servers and Blackjack reportedly also disabled 150 computers.

"In fact, Russian special construction workers were left without the entire array of data and backup copies of information. Now they will have to build new facilities by memory," Ukrainian law enforcement sources told the publication Ukrinform.

The recent development follows reports of the hacker group conducting a cyber attack on Moscow's internet provider, M9 Telecom, leaving residents without internet access, as reported by Ukrinform. This was seen as a preparatory strike preceding a larger retaliation against Russian hackers who breached Ukraine's communications giant, Kyivstar, in 2023.

During the 2023 attack on Kyivstar, Russian hackers infiltrated the private company's system with the aim of gathering intelligence and delivering a psychological impact, as revealed by Illia Vitiuk, the head of the Security Service of Ukraine's (SBU) cybersecurity department. This resulted in a service outage for approximately 24 million users for several days, beginning on December 12. Kyivstar acknowledged the hack, attributing it at the time to a "technical failure" that temporarily disrupted mobile and internet services.

This demonstrates the important role that hacking and cyber operations play in modern warfare. Hacking allows nations to infiltrate the computer systems of adversaries to gather classified information, military strategies, and other sensitive data. Cyber espionage provides a covert means of acquiring intelligence without direct physical confrontation.

With cyber attacks, a state can target critical infrastructure, such as power grids, communication networks, and transportation systems. Disrupting these systems can cripple a nation's capabilities, impacting its ability to defend itself or conduct military operations.

These operations fall within the broader sphere of hybrid warfare, which is especially relevant in the Ukraine-Russia conflict given the conflict's limited scope. Ukraine, being a smaller military power, finds itself compelled to use unconventional methods such as sabotage, hacking, and disruption of key industries to close the gap with Russia.

Moscow, meanwhile, wants to limit the destruction inflicted upon Ukraine, in part to not arouse further international outcry and opposition, which would be inevitable if it simply leveled Ukrainian cities to the ground. Such an escalation would almost surely lead to other powers becoming directly involved in the conflict. Thus, Russia finds itself obliged to tie its own hands to a degree in the conflict, which likewise necessitates the use of conventional hybrid tactics.

And in the modern world, economic warfare is also pivotal. Ukraine is attempting to leverage this form of warfare against Ukraine by appealing to the West.

Writing on X Thursday night, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky urged his allies to make sure sanctions on Russia are being enforced.

"Blocking sanctions evasion loopholes means literally blocking terror. I am grateful to all of our

partners who understand this, as well as everyone around the world who supports our relevant efforts," wrote the Ukrainian head of state.

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