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The Kyiv Doctrine:
Code, Drones and Distributed Defense

In late 2025, in the forest belts near Pokrovsk in eastern Ukraine, a tracked vehicle the size of a large dog began holding ground that no human soldier could safely hold. The vehicle—a TerMIT unmanned ground system built in a Ukrainian workshop for roughly twelve thousand dollars—maintained the supply line into a forward position for forty-five consecutive days. It was reloaded and serviced every forty-eight hours by a small ground crew that approached only at night. It carried ammunition forward, water and rations forward, and on at least one occasion carried a wounded soldier back. “Only the UGV system was present at the position,” Mykola Zinkevych of Ukraine’s Third Army Corps told reporters when the rotation ended. “This was the core concept. Robots do not bleed” (RobotToday).

Around the same vehicle, in the same months, an entirely new kind of defense industry was being assembled. Two hundred and seventy Ukrainian companies were producing more than two hundred distinct models of unmanned ground vehicle. Fifteen thousand of those vehicles had been delivered to the front by the end of 2025, a six-and-a-half-fold increase over the prior year (RobotToday). Aerial drone units were being ranked on a public leaderboard maintained by the Ministry of Defense, ePoints awarded for confirmed kills, top-performing battalions earning priority access to the next quarter’s procurement (Euromaidan Press). And a defense-innovation marketplace called Brave1, conceived as the equivalent of a venture-capital accelerator for weapons, was running its battlefield-data analytics on Palantir software (The Defense Post). What had been a conventional war of armored brigades in 2022 had become, by 2026, the first conflict in history fought primarily through software-defined platforms procured through a consumer-style marketplace, optimized through telemetry, and iterated on a three-month product cycle. This article is a brief account of how that happened, and what it means.

I. THE DOCTRINE IN ONE SENTENCE

The Kyiv Doctrine is the proposition that distributed, software-defined, rapidly-iterated, low-cost autonomous systems — procured through a transparent marketplace and optimized through battlefield telemetry — can substitute for the mass and the firepower that smaller militaries have always lacked against larger ones. It is not a doctrine in the formal Soviet sense of a published document. It is the set of operational principles that Ukrainian forces and their civilian industrial counterparts have arrived at, by necessity and through iteration, between 2022 and 2026. Five propositions form its core.

First, hardware platforms are commodities; software is the durable advantage. A TerMIT chassis can be assembled in a Ukrainian workshop in days. The autonomy stack that allows it to navigate at night under jamming, the analytical pipeline that resolves its sensor feeds into a single common operational picture, and the procurement platform that determines which units receive the next production batch — these take years to build and decades to displace. **Second, iteration speed beats unit quality.** A drone that worked three months ago may not work today, because Russian electronic warfare has adapted; a Ukrainian engineer takes eleven days, on average, from a frontline user complaint to a deployed firmware update. No NATO procurement system can match that cycle, and most do not try (Center for Security and Emerging Technology). **Third, mass is produced through distributed civilian manufacture, not through centralized arsenals.** Tencore, the maker of TerMIT, employs roughly two hundred people. The fifteen-thousand-unit fleet of UGVs deployed in 2025 was assembled across hundreds of small workshops, garages, and converted factory lines whose total payroll is smaller than a single Lockheed Martin campus. **Fourth, the warfighter is a co-developer.** Frontline operators submit feedback directly to manufacturers, often via Signal or Telegram; manufacturers iterate the same week. **Fifth, procurement is gamified, transparent, and meritocratic.** Units earn points for verified destruction of enemy assets and spend those points in a public marketplace called Brave1 Market. The best units get the best equipment first, and everyone can see the leaderboard.

Each of these propositions inverts a deep assumption of twentieth-century defense procurement. The combination is what makes the Kyiv Doctrine genuinely new.

II. THE TERMIT AND THE ROBOT LOGISTICS LAYER

The TerMIT is the most-produced and most-photographed example of the broader category, but it is one platform among dozens. Built by Tencore, a Ukrainian company of roughly two hundred employees, it is a tracked unmanned ground vehicle weighing 280 kilograms, capable of carrying a 300-kilogram payload across heavy off-road terrain (Ukraine's Arms Monitor). The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence officially codified the platform for service in June 2025; by the end of that year, Tencore had delivered approximately 2,000 units to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, with more than twenty brigades operating the system in active combat (Calibre Defence). A single TerMIT costs approximately twelve thousand United States dollars to build. Its Western analog, the Milrem THeMIS, costs between one hundred thousand and five hundred thousand dollars per unit (RobotToday).

What the TerMIT and its peer platforms have done at scale is restructure the most lethal task on the modern battlefield: the supply run. Russian fiber-optic drones, which transmit commands through a physical cable rather than via radio and so cannot be jammed, have extended the kill zone deep into the Ukrainian rear. In sectors like Pokrovsk, Avdiivka, and Kupiansk, human carriers of supplies face a seventy-to-ninety percent probability of death or wounding (RobotToday). By November 2025, the BBC reported that up to ninety percent of all supplies to Ukrainian frontline positions around Pokrovsk were being delivered by unmanned ground vehicles. The TerMIT does not bleed; if it is destroyed, another twelve thousand dollars and ten man-hours produces a replacement.

The platform is also modular by design. A TerMIT base unit can be reconfigured between logistics, casualty evacuation, minelaying, electronic-warfare, and combat-strike configurations in roughly ten minutes, using a few wrenches and a power drill. Tracks are interchangeable; the vehicle can be repaired at any standard automotive workshop equipped with a vehicle lift

(Ukraine’s Arms Monitor). Approximately sixty-five percent of its components are domestically produced. Some sensors, batteries, and chips remain imported, which is the principal remaining vulnerability of the platform’s supply chain. The roadmap for 2026 is to move incrementally toward full domestic production of those subsystems.

Operationally, the lesson the TerMIT illustrates is that ground robotics is no longer a research category; it is a logistics category. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence’s 2025 procurement target for UGVs was 7,500 units. The figure actually delivered exceeded 15,000 (RobotToday). By comparison, the United States Army’s Robotic Combat Vehicle program, which began earlier and is funded at considerably greater absolute scale, has fielded fewer than two hundred vehicles to operational units. The asymmetry is not technological. Western platforms remain, in many specifications, more sophisticated. The asymmetry is institutional: a war economy iterating on a three-month cycle is producing combat-ready platforms faster than a peacetime acquisition system can complete an environmental-impact review.

III. BRAVE1: THE INSTITUTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

What makes the iteration cycle possible is an institutional layer that did not exist before April 2023. The Brave1 cluster, founded jointly by the Ukrainian Ministry of Digital Transformation, the Ministry of Defence, the General Staff, the National Security and Defence Council, the Ministry of Strategic Industries, and the Ministry of Economy, was designed as a single coordinating platform between the state, private manufacturers, foreign investors, and the warfighter (Brave1, “About”). Initial funding was 100 million hryvnias, approximately 2.7 million U.S. dollars; the 2024 budget rose to 1.5 billion hryvnias, roughly 39 million dollars (Wikipedia, “Brave1”). By late 2025 the platform connected over a thousand companies, had funded more than four hundred individual projects, and had stood up two distinct subsystems that have since become essential.

The first is Brave1 Market, a public marketplace launched in April 2025 that lists more than a thousand combat-tested products across aerial drones, ground drones, electronic-warfare systems, components, and software (Armourer’s Bench). Ukrainian Defense Minister Mykhailo

Fedorov has described the system as “the Amazon for the military” (Armourer’s Bench). Frontline units browse a public catalogue of certified equipment and submit orders directly to manufacturers; a closed catalogue, accessed through the Delta battlefield-management system, holds equipment classified as sensitive. **The second is Brave1 Dataroom**, announced in January 2026, a secure cloud environment running on Palantir software that ingests structured visual and thermal datasets collected directly from the front and uses them to train artificial-intelligence models for drone defense, target recognition, and electronic-warfare discrimination (The Defense Post). The Dataroom is the operational expression of a thesis Deera has examined elsewhere: that the decisive layer of modern military power is the ontology, not the platform. Brave1 is the first state-level institution in Europe to have built one for itself.

The cluster has begun, in 2026, to function as an export infrastructure as well. The UNITE Brave NATO programme, launched in March 2026 in collaboration with the NATO Communications and Information Agency, will direct ten million euros toward counter-drone, signals-intelligence, and autonomous-guidance technology developed jointly between Ukrainian and NATO firms (Kyiv Post). The Defense Tech Valley summit, scheduled for September 2026 in Lviv, is expected to draw thousands of international participants. Brave1’s public framing of its 2026 mission is unambiguous: “If you are not in Ukraine, you are not in the defense tech market” (United24 Media). The claim is bold. It is also, increasingly, accurate.

IV. EPOINTS: PROCUREMENT AS LEADERBOARD

The most institutionally radical element of the Kyiv Doctrine is the Army of Drones Bonus, a public points system that the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence uses to allocate equipment to drone units. Each verified destruction of an enemy asset generates ePoints, awarded according to a published schedule: a destroyed Russian tank is worth more than a destroyed light vehicle, an enemy soldier captured alive more than one killed. Points are tallied on a leaderboard visible to the public and to other units. Top performers receive priority access to the next quarter’s production through Brave1 Market (Euromaidan Press). On 26 January 2026, Defense Minister Fedorov presented the leaderboard for the prior twelve months: 820,000 verified target hits, 240,000 confirmed kills, and the 414th Unmanned Strike Aviation Brigade — better known by its call sign, Madyar's Birds — in first place with sufficient ePoints to procure roughly five hundred FPV drones, five hundred night-capable drones, one hundred heavy-lift drones, and forty reconnaissance UAVs in a single order (Armourer's Bench).

The system has been criticized, including by Western observers, as the "gamification of war." The criticism has obvious force. But the procurement logic underneath it is harder to dismiss. The Army of Drones Bonus solves a problem every twentieth-century military has struggled with: how to allocate scarce equipment to the units that will use it most effectively, in conditions where political and personal favoritism would otherwise dominate the decision. By tying allocation to verified battlefield output and making the scoreboard public, the Ukrainian system makes corruption operationally visible and rewards measurable performance over rank. Defense Minister Fedorov summarized the underlying premise in his January 2026 message: "Modern warfare is a war of data, speed, and precise decisions" (Euromaidan Press). The system that allocates the weapons must itself be a data system.

V. WHAT IT MEANS ELSEWHERE

The Kyiv Doctrine is, in the strictest sense, the product of a national emergency that is unlikely to recur in identical form anywhere else. Most states are not, and will not be, fighting an existential ground war against a numerically superior adversary. The specific institutional improvisations of Brave1 — founded in the first months of a full-scale invasion, funded against the constant threat of national collapse, staffed by engineers who spend their weekends on the frontline — cannot simply be lifted off the shelf and applied in a peacetime context.

But the underlying propositions are exportable, and the smaller and more strategically exposed a state is, the more applicable they become. A defense ministry that operates a transparent procurement marketplace will outperform one that does not. A defense industrial base built on hundreds of small specialized firms will out-iterate one built on three integrated primes. A procurement system that ties equipment allocation to verified operational performance will produce better outcomes than one that distributes by political seniority. A national defense data layer that owns its own ontology will adapt to novel threats faster than one that licenses its analytics from a foreign vendor. None of these claims requires an active war to validate. The war merely makes them undeniable.

For the Gulf, the relevant lesson is not that GCC states should anticipate ground combat with a peer adversary. It is that the institutional architecture Ukraine has built — the marketplace, the dataroom, the leaderboard, the three-month iteration cycle — constitutes the most advanced working model of how a small-to-medium state can construct a sovereign defense-tech capability without becoming a colony of any single foreign vendor. The Gulf states are small populations defending large geographies, with substantial fiscal capacity and a strategic environment that rewards autonomy of decision. Each of those features maps closely onto what Ukraine has had to improvise. The question is no longer whether such an architecture matters. The question is who will build a regional version of it, and on what terms.

VI. CONCLUSION

Two years from now, the historical assessment of the Russo-Ukrainian war will rest, in part, on which side's industrial and institutional adaptations proved more durable. The territorial outcome is contingent on factors well beyond the scope of this article. The doctrinal outcome, however, is already settled. The Ukrainian Armed Forces have, between 2022 and 2026, built and fielded the largest distributed autonomous-systems fleet in the history of warfare. They have done it through a procurement architecture that treats software as the durable input, hardware as the commodity, and the warfighter as the principal customer. They have built the institutional layer, the data layer, and the marketplace layer in parallel, and they have done all of this in a country whose annual defense budget remains a fraction of any G7 member's. The platforms that will define the next decade of land warfare are being manufactured, today, in workshops a long-range missile's flight from the front. That fact is the doctrine. Anyone serious about the future of defense will be studying it for some time.

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