

Ukraine's Second Front. Kyiv's War for the Global South

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In late March 2026, a month after the outbreak of the war with Iran, Volodymyr Zelensky toured Jeddah, Abu Dhabi, Doha and Amman in three days. With Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Jordan he signed defence cooperation agreements providing for joint investment, joint production and the sharing of experience and solutions in defence against missiles and unmanned aircraft [1]. There was nothing of the supplicant in these visits. Ukraine came to the Gulf to sell a skill that, as the only state in the world, it has practised daily for four years, namely the downing of Shahed drones. Its counter-drone command system today protects the American Prince Sultan air base in Saudi Arabia, and Ukrainian instructors train American soldiers there [2]. A state that in the West is still described solely as a recipient of aid appears in the Gulf as a provider of security. Ukraine conducts a global policy today not despite the war, but thanks to the competences the war has given it.

This scene crowns a campaign that Kyiv has waged for four years and that Polish debate has barely noticed. Since 2022 Ukraine has fought a second war with Russia in the Global South, running parallel to the one in the trenches, and it fights it along two strands at once. The overt strand consists of embassies, food deliveries, mediation and the pursuit of votes in the UN General Assembly. The covert strand consists of military intelligence operations against Russian mercenaries from Mali to Sudan and Syria. The heart of this story, however, lies not in the mere existence of the two strands, but in the tension between them. They do not always work together, and at times they cancel each other out, because a victory of the intelligence services can cost diplomacy dearly. Does Ukraine therefore pursue a single coherent strategy in the Global South, or two parallel policies, diplomatic and intelligence-led, run by different institutions, with different aims and at times at cross purposes? The answer has changed over time, and its present shape should give pause to anyone planning Polish policy towards the South.

The scale of Ukraine's backlog in its presence in the Global South was already shown by the vote of March 2014. After the annexation of Crimea, the resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine was supported in the General Assembly by only one hundred states, eleven were against, fifty-eight abstained, and twenty-four did not vote at all [3]. Half the world took no side, and this was no accident. Ukraine at that time maintained only eleven missions in all of Africa against around forty Russian ones, and its diplomacy concentrated on the West and its immediate neighbourhood. Over the following eight years little changed. It took the full-scale invasion of February 2022 to force the realisation that the Global South is not the backdrop of the war, but another of its theatres, one on which Russia holds an advantage built over decades. That advantage rests on the Soviet legacy, thousands of officers and engineers educated in Moscow, arms deliveries, the mercenaries of Wagner and a narrative in which Western sanctions, rather than the Russian blockade of the ports, are to blame for the rising price of bread. Only from 2022, therefore, can one speak of a Ukrainian strategy towards the South rather than of isolated gestures. For a state fighting for survival, that strategy took shape astonishingly fast.

The Overt Strand. Embassies, Grain, Narrative

As early as January 2022, before the invasion, Kyiv adopted its first ever strategy towards the states of Africa, and a few months later revived the office of special representative for the Middle East and Africa, entrusting it to the Arabist Maksym Subkh [4]. The foreign minister toured twelve states of the continent in four trips over 2022 and 2023. The number of Ukrainian embassies in Africa rose after 2022 from eleven to eighteen, following the opening of missions in Botswana, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania, Mozambique and Rwanda, and the goal is to raise that number to twenty [5]. The choice of locations is not accidental. The new embassy in Abidjan was set up a stone's throw from the Russian one, and Ukrainian diplomats say openly that the point is to mark a presence wherever Russian diplomacy is most active. To the expansion of its diplomatic network Kyiv added concrete instruments for building relations. The Grain from Ukraine programme, run with the World Food Programme, brought aid to around eight million people in need in twelve African states [6]. In Mauritania Ukraine went a step further, combining aid for refugees from Mali with an offer to train the local armed forces [7]. The final link is the communication strategy for 2024 to 2026, that is, the narrative that Ukraine has begun to sell to the South. It is meant to break through what Ukrainians call the information isolation, the state in which the image of their country in African media is shaped by Russian sources.

This set of actions is not a collection of random gestures. The presence of an embassy opens the possibility of direct conversation with each capital, food deliveries build credibility, military training creates a common interest, and the narrative binds it all into a whole. It is a version of the toolkit with which Russia built its presence in Africa over decades, only recreated by Ukraine in different conditions and with different resources. Ukraine does not try to outbid Moscow with means it does not have. Instead it strikes at two pillars of the Russian offer to part of the continent, namely security and access to food.

From Jeddah to Damascus

This logic went furthest in the Middle East. First came the pursuit of recognition. In May 2023 Zelensky addressed the Arab League summit in Jeddah and accused some leaders of turning a blind eye to the Russian assault, and in August of the same year Saudi Arabia hosted, in the same city, talks on the Ukrainian peace formula with the participation of more than forty states, including China, India and the United States, without Russia [8]. Riyadh already had merits in Kyiv's eyes, having negotiated the exchange of nearly two hundred and seventy prisoners in September 2022 and promised four hundred million dollars in aid in February 2023 [9]. In the following years the Gulf became neutral ground for talks on ending the war. In February 2025 Zelensky was signing a tariff-free trade agreement in Abu Dhabi in the very days when the American and Russian delegations were meeting in Riyadh for the first time since the start of the full-scale invasion [10].

Then came Syria, and this is the most instructive chapter of the whole campaign. Three weeks after the fall of Bashar al-Assad, on 30 December 2024, the head of Ukrainian diplomacy Andrii Sybiha was

already standing in Damascus before Syria's new leader Ahmed al-Sharaa. He brought five hundred tonnes of flour, an offer of economic cooperation and help in documenting the crimes of the overthrown regime [11]. Ukraine stepped into the vacuum left by Russia, which for half a century had been Syria's supplier of grain and a prop of its rule. What followed came quickly. In September 2025, when the Syrian leader stood at the rostrum of the General Assembly for the first time since 1967, the foreign ministers of Ukraine and Syria signed in New York a joint communiqué on the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two states, in November Syrian ministers came to Kyiv for a conference on food security, and in April 2026 Zelensky paid his first visit to Damascus, after which the reopening of embassies was announced and the Ukrainian side reported a ninefold rise in trade since the autumn of 2025 [12]. Who prepared this success was stated by Zelensky himself, thanking Ukrainian intelligence publicly for laying the groundwork for contacts with the new authorities in Damascus [13]. Rarely does a state admit so openly that its covert and overt policy are one organism.

Finally the Gulf and the March tour with which this text begins. Qatar signed with Kyiv a ten-year defence partnership including joint production facilities, Saudi Arabia an agreement providing for the joint development of air defence, and the Emirates an accord on cooperation in security and defence [14]. These agreements are not isolated transactions, but part of a broader architecture of engagement that Kyiv calls the Drone Deal format. Nearly twenty states take part in the talks, four agreements have already been signed, and Zelensky has instructed the foreign ministry, the intelligence service and the Security Service of Ukraine to draw up jointly a list of states to which arms exports are excluded on account of their ties with Russia [15]. This construction is worth examining, because diplomacy and the services here design a single instrument of foreign policy together. The reach of this game is shown by Pakistan. According to reports from the summer of 2026, Ukrainian instructors are training Pakistani drone operators, and the cooperation has its roots in the servicing of Pakistani T-80UD tanks and in talks on technology transfer conducted long before the full-scale war [16]. Kyiv thus plays simultaneously on boards where the West is simply absent. Pakistan is, after all, a signatory of the August Mecca pact and China's closest partner, and yet it finds room for Ukrainian instructors. Anyone who follows the markets of Central Asia and the Gulf knows that Pakistani industry is an active player on them. Cooperation with Pakistan therefore shows that a Ukrainian presence can open Kyiv access to economic and security networks reaching far beyond the bilateral relationship.

The Tally of Votes

The effectiveness of the overt strand is best measured where it turns into figures, that is, in the votes of the General Assembly. Their sequence from 2014 forms a clear arc [17].

Date	Resolution	For	Against	Abstain
27 Mar 2014	68/262, territorial integrity of Ukraine	100	11	58
2 Mar 2022	ES-11/1, condemnation of the aggression against Ukraine	141	5	35
24 Mar 2022	ES-11/2, humanitarian consequences of the aggression	140	5	38

12 Oct 2022	ES-11/4, invalidity of the annexation of four regions	143	5	35
14 Nov 2022	ES-11/5, war reparations	94	13	74
23 Feb 2023	ES-11/6, principles of a just peace	141	7	32
Feb 2025	Ukrainian and European text	93	18	65
Feb 2025	US text after European amendments	93	8	73
Feb 2026	ES-11/10, anniversary resolution	107	12	51

Support for Ukraine in 2022 was far broader than eight years earlier, but from the outset it was geographically uneven. The resolution condemning the Russian aggression was supported by 141 states, yet in Africa only twenty-eight of fifty-four states voted for it. The continent thus became the largest cluster of states unwilling to take an unambiguous stand on Ukraine's side over the war [18]. The figures themselves show, however, that support for Ukraine has its limits. The largest majorities were gathered by resolutions condemning the aggression and affirming the basic principles of international law. When, in November 2022, a text concerning reparations and a compensation mechanism came to a vote, the number of votes in favour fell from the 143 cast a month earlier against the Russian annexations to 94. It was thus easier to build a majority around the defence of territorial integrity than around the concrete consequences that were meant to follow from it.

This does not mean, however, that the positions of individual states are random. Studies of General Assembly votes point to the importance of concrete dependencies, that is, military cooperation with Russia, aid received from it and participation in the Chinese Belt and Road [19]. This is especially clear in Africa, where support for successive resolutions on Ukraine diminished over time. In February 2025 the divide ran, however, no longer only between the West and part of the Global South. The United States voted against a text supported by Ukraine and the European states, together with, among others, Russia, Mali, Niger and Sudan. The presence of Mali and Niger in that group carries an additional meaning, because a few months earlier both states had broken off diplomatic relations with Kyiv after the disclosure of Ukrainian support for Tuareg rebels. We shall return to this connection.

A year later, support for the anniversary resolution rose to 107 votes. This did not signal a simple reversal of the earlier trend. A softer wording of the text made it easier for some states to return to the majority [20]. The votes therefore do not show a simple division of the world into states supporting Ukraine and those favouring Russia. They show rather shifting coalitions whose composition depends both on the interests and ties of individual states and on what exactly a given resolution concerns.

The Covert Strand

The covert operations began earlier and reached further than is commonly supposed. The best documented so far is Sudan, where in September 2023 Zelensky met unannounced with General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan at Shannon airport, and afterwards spoke of shared challenges from armed groups paid by Russia [21]. A month earlier, according to accounts by Ukrainian soldiers given to the Wall Street Journal, a group of around one hundred military intelligence personnel landed in Sudan and, by

night, using drones and night-vision equipment, supported al-Burhan's forces against the Wagner-linked Rapid Support Forces [22]. In February 2024 the world saw recordings in which operators of the Timur group of the HUR military intelligence interrogate captured Wagner mercenaries [23]. The logic of these actions is simple and ruthless. Since Wagner earned in Africa the money for the war against Ukraine, Ukraine set out to turn Africa for it from a source of income into a cost.

The limits of this logic Ukraine discovered in Mali. In late July 2024, at Tinzaouaten, near the border with Algeria, Tuareg insurgents inflicted on the Malian army and Wagner the heaviest losses in the history of the Russian presence in the Sahel, killing at least eighty-four Wagner mercenaries and forty-seven Malian soldiers [24]. Two days later the HUR spokesman Andrii Yusov announced publicly that the insurgents had received the necessary information, and not only information, while further reports spoke of their being trained in the use of drones [25]. To this are added reports of strikes on Russian mercenaries in Libya and of actions against Russian targets in Syria still before the fall of Assad, which must, however, be read with caution, as they come mainly from Ukrainian sources [26]. In July 2026 the Iraqi national security adviser accused Ukraine of directing a cell responsible for explosions at Iraqi state facilities, then admitted in the same statement that he had no evidence to bring charges, and Kyiv categorically denied it [27]. Whatever the truth of it, the accusation itself shows how widely the imagination of the reach of the Ukrainian services already stretches. This strand has, moreover, its own autonomous logic, which the head of military intelligence Kyrylo Budanov put bluntly when he promised to kill Russians everywhere in the world until victory. One thing is beyond doubt. The struggle against the Russian mercenary apparatus did not end with Wagner, because its succession was taken over by the Africa Corps, subordinate to the Russian defence ministry, and Ukraine carries it on.

The Lesson of Mali, the Lesson of Syria

Tinzaouaten was a tactical masterstroke and at the same time a defeat of overt policy. After Yusov's statement Mali, and Niger after it, broke off diplomatic relations with Kyiv, Senegal summoned the Ukrainian ambassador, and ECOWAS, though itself at odds with the juntas, rebuked Ukraine [28]. Six months later both states voted in New York against a resolution supported by Kyiv. Ukraine lost, however, more than its relations with Mali and Niger. For two years it had built in Africa a narrative of a state that defends sovereignty and territorial integrity, after which its own spokesman boasted of support for a rebellion against the government of an African state, in a battle in which the jihadists of JNIM also claimed a part. For many Africans this was a familiar story of the continent as a proving ground for others' quarrels, this time with Ukraine in the role that Russia had played until then. A single statement by a spokesman put at risk the work of a dozen embassies. It would be hard to find a better proof that two strands of the same policy, run by different institutions and judged against different aims, can work against each other.

Both strands nonetheless played together wherever they were set on the same side. In Syria the intelligence services built contacts before diplomacy had even packed its bags, and diplomacy forged

them into concrete results, that is, into food deliveries, restored relations and reopened embassies. In the Gulf, war experience, instead of weighing on the image, became the most valuable commodity Kyiv has to offer states living under Iranian fire, and the list of arms recipients is drawn up jointly by diplomats and officers of the services. The difference from the Sahel lies not in luck, but in the ordering of priorities. In Mali Ukraine acted against the government of the host state, on the side of the rebels, and announced it besides. In the Middle East it acts on the side of governments, at their invitation and in their interest. The answer to the question posed at the outset therefore runs as follows. In 2023 and 2024 the two strands were capable of acting according to different logics, of which the Sahel became the most costly example. Since 2025, however, Syria and the Gulf have been supplying ever more examples of their deliberate combination. It is still too early to speak of a full change of model, but the direction of the correction is clear. The very pace at which it was made is perhaps the most impressive feature of the whole campaign. It should not, however, be overrated, because the successes of this strand have clear limits. In Sudan Russia today in effect supports both sides of the civil war, so Ukrainian strikes at one of them do not push it out of the game, but at most raise the cost of its presence.

Conclusions for Poland

Ukraine's experience in the Global South is of interest to Poland not because of the scale of Kyiv's presence, but because of the way in which Ukraine has begun to combine the various instruments of the state around concrete political aims. Diplomacy, food aid, military training, drone technology, the defence industry and communication do not function here as separate areas of activity, but increasingly complement one another. Within a few years Ukraine has expanded its network of embassies in Africa, used the political change in Syria to enter that country's food market, developed military cooperation with Mauritania and Pakistan, and in the Gulf states has begun to turn the experience gained during the war into defence and industrial partnerships. In this way a model is emerging whose significance reaches beyond Ukraine's own policy towards the Global South.

For Poland what matters above all is the method behind it. Ukraine does out of necessity what, in the text on deconcentration, we called the logic of the fan, that is, it builds parallel ties with states belonging to different political and security arrangements, without expecting a full convergence of interests. A partnership in one field does not require partnership in all the others. Kyiv can thus develop military cooperation with Pakistan despite its close relations with China, or build defence partnerships with the Gulf monarchies, which at the same time maintain their own channels of cooperation with Russia. The value of the Ukrainian experience for Poland lies therefore not in providing a model to copy, but in showing how limited resources can be combined into selective partnerships answering to the concrete interests of both sides.

Three practical conclusions for Poland follow from this analysis. The first concerns the scope for cooperation with Ukraine in the markets where Kyiv is building new relations today. This is not about following Ukraine, nor about assuming that the interests of the two states will everywhere coincide.

In selected sectors, however, their resources may be complementary. Ukrainian battlefield experience and the technologies developed during the war can be combined with Polish production capacity, financing, logistics and access to European instruments. The Gulf, Central Asia and part of the African states may be the place for such joint ventures precisely because what is increasingly sought there is not a single product, but a package comprising technology, training, financing, servicing and long-term cooperation.

The second conclusion concerns the way Ukrainian activity beyond Europe is perceived. Its direct influence on the course of the war should not be overrated, but neither should it be treated as a peripheral addition to Ukraine's security policy. Rivalry with Russian military structures in Africa, the curbing of Russian political influence and the taking over of the economic space that Moscow is vacating are elements of a broader competition with the same adversary. Their significance for the Ukrainian front remains indirect and uneven, but for European policy towards Russia the very fact that this competition does not end at Europe's borders should matter.

The third conclusion is at the same time the most important warning. Tinzaouaten showed that a greater number of instruments need not mean a more effective policy. An action advantageous from the point of view of one state actor may generate costs for another if the two define success differently. In Ukraine's case a tactical blow dealt to Russian mercenaries was paid for with the breaking off of diplomatic relations with Mali and Niger and with the weakening of the narrative of the defence of sovereignty that Kyiv had built in Africa. For Poland the lesson lies, therefore, not in the need to create a single centre directing all instruments, but in ensuring a mechanism that allows diplomatic, economic, military and covert actions to be assessed from the perspective of a common political aim.

Ukraine's experience shows more broadly how a middle power can partly compensate for a limited scale of resources through the way it uses them, replacing a lack of capital with unique competence, a limited presence with a network of selective partnerships, and war experience with a political, technological and economic asset. This is not a model to be copied simply. Mali shows the costs of a lack of coordination, Syria and the Gulf the benefits of combining instruments around a common aim. In this sense Ukraine's experience complements the logic of the fan described earlier. Building many parallel relations is not yet a strategy. It becomes one only when a state knows what it wants from particular partners, what it can offer them and where the limits of cooperation run. For Poland the fundamental question is therefore not whether it needs more embassies, visits and initiatives towards the Global South, but whether it can bring together diplomacy, security, industry and financing around clearly defined interests. The wider the fan of relations, the greater the importance of the ability to keep it coherent.

Notes

- [1] Kyiv Post, „Zelensky Agrees Defense Cooperation Agreements with UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, on Gulf Tour”, 28 March 2026; Al Jazeera, „Ukraine’s Zelenskyy signs air defence deals with UAE, Qatar on Gulf tour”, 28 March 2026; Atlantic Council, „Zelenskyy’s Gulf region tour was a masterclass in wartime diplomacy”, 31 March 2026.
- [2] Defense.info, „The Global War in Ukraine Reaches the Gulf”, 5 April 2026; agency reports on the deployment of the Ukrainian Sky Map system at the Prince Sultan base, April 2026.
- [3] UN General Assembly, resolution 68/262 „Territorial integrity of Ukraine”, 27 March 2014.
- [4] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Strategy for Relations with African States, January 2022; Foreign Policy, „Ukraine’s Next Big Diplomatic Offensive Is in the Global South”, 17 May 2023.
- [5] Espresso, „Ukraine expands diplomatic presence in Africa, opens 7 new embassies”, November 2024; Prism UA, „Ukraine, South Africa. From Functional Engagement to Strategic Ties”, 2025; Vanguard, „Opening of Ukrainian embassies in Africa. What are the stakes?”, 19 April 2024.
- [6] European Council on Foreign Relations, „The other counter-offensive. Ukraine’s diplomatic push in Africa”, October 2025.
- [7] Lawfare, „How Ukraine Is Challenging Russia in Africa and the Middle East”, 2025.
- [8] Times of Israel, „Saudi Arabia hosts nearly 40 nations, including China, for talks on Ukraine”, 5 August 2023; Reuters, statement of the Chinese foreign ministry on the participation of envoy Li Hui, 7 August 2023; Al Jazeera, „Saudi Arabia kicks off Ukraine talks that exclude Russia”, 5 August 2023.
- [9] The National, „Saudi Arabia confirms Ukraine peace talks in Jeddah at weekend”, 4 August 2023; CNN, „Why is Saudi Arabia hosting talks to end the Ukraine war?”, 17 February 2025.
- [10] AP, „Ukraine’s President Zelenskyy travels to United Arab Emirates as momentum grows for peace talks”, 17 February 2025; dpa, „Zelensky visits Gulf at same time as US secretary of state”, February 2025.
- [11] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, communiqué on the visit of Andrii Sybiha to Damascus, 30 December 2024.
- [12] Al Jazeera, „Ukraine, Syria restore diplomatic ties after breakdown during Assad regime”, 25 September 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, meeting with the Syrian delegation at the Food from Ukraine conference, 19 November 2025; Euromaidan Press, „Ukraine and Syria to reopen embassies as trade hits ninefold surge since September”, 6 April 2026.
- [13] RFE/RL, „Zelenskiy Says Ukraine Is Preparing To Reestablish Diplomatic Ties With Syria”, 2 January 2025.
- [14] Monocle, „As threats rise, the Gulf turns to Ukraine’s war-tested expertise”, 7 April 2026; communiqué of the Ministry of Defence of Qatar, 28 March 2026.
- [15] Euronews, „Ukraine says it will open arms exports with Drone Deals, but not to all countries”, 28 April 2026; CBS News, „Ukraine and U.S. move toward landmark drone defense deal”, 13 May 2026; Kyiv Post on the draft memorandum with the United States, 13 May 2026.
- [16] India Narrative, „Pakistan’s Drone Ambitions Gain Ukrainian Backing”, July 2026; Defense Mirror, „Ukraine, Pakistan Discussing Joint Venture, Technology Transfer Deals”, and the Ukroboronprom contract for the servicing of T-80UD tanks, 2021.
- [17] United Nations Digital Library, resolution 68/262 and resolutions ES-11/1 to ES-11/10 together with the voting records; UN News, coverage of the February 2025 votes; Valdai Club, „UNGA Voting Results on the Ukraine Conflict Anniversary Resolution”, February 2026; SAIIA, „UN Votes on Ukraine. Shifting Alliances and the Global South’s Role”, 2025. Some sources give the ES-11/5 result as 94, 14 and 73, and the February 2025 Ukrainian and European text as 98 in favour, so before publication the figures should be verified against the official voting records.

[18] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, „Will the Invasion of Ukraine Change Russia-Africa Relations?“, 2023.

[19] Bruegel, „What really influences United Nations voting on Ukraine?“, 2023.

[20] SAIIA, „UN Votes on Ukraine. Shifting Alliances and the Global South’s Role“, 2025; Valdai Club, February 2026; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, analysis by Sam Bowden, November 2025, for the data on the fall in support among African states from twenty-five in 2023 to thirteen in 2025.

[21] Post by Volodymyr Zelensky on the meeting with Abdel Fattah al-Burhan at Shannon airport, September 2023.

[22] Wall Street Journal, accounts by Ukrainian soldiers of operations in Sudan, discussed among others by Libération, March 2024.

[23] Kyiv Post, „Ukrainian Special Forces Interrogate Wagner Mercenaries in Sudan“, 5 February 2024.

[24] The New York Times and accounts by the parties of the battle of Tinzaouaten, 25 to 27 July 2024; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, analysis by Sam Bowden of Ukrainian operations in Africa, November 2025, from which the data on at least eighty-four Wagner mercenaries and forty-seven Malian soldiers killed derive.

[25] The Guardian, „Ukraine military intelligence claims role in deadly Wagner ambush in Mali“, 29 July 2024; Military Africa, „Ukraine provided intel to Mali’s Tuareg rebels“, 30 July 2024.

[26] Kyiv Post, reports of drone operations against Russian mercenaries in Libya and Sudan, 2024; Türkiye Today, „Ukrainian intelligence claims role in deadly Wagner ambush in Mali“, 30 July 2024.

[27] Militarnyi, „Iraq Accuses Ukraine Of Intelligence Activities On Its Territory“, 28 July 2026; Mehr News Agency, „Cells belonging to Ukraine carried out bombings in Iraq“, July 2026.

[28] BBC, „Was Ukraine’s role in big Wagner defeat an own goal in Africa?“, August 2024; AFP, reports on the breaking off of diplomatic relations with Ukraine by Mali and Niger, 4 and 6 August 2024.