



# Red Diamond

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## Russian and Chinese Infiltration Tactics Take Two Different Paths to Success

by Scott Pettigrew, TRADOC Intelligence Specialist

**Both Russia and China use infiltration to circumvent enemy defenses when direct assaults are infeasible due to the strength of the enemy's positions or to gain a tactical advantage.** The effectiveness of infiltration tactics is evident in contemporary conflicts, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine. These tactics bypass strong defenses, support intelligence gathering and targeting, and create chaos behind enemy lines. Russian and Chinese doctrine diverge, however, regarding when and how to use infiltration tactics.

**Russia has frequently used infiltration in its operations in Ukraine, including in Crimea, Donbas, and other parts of Ukraine during the early days of its so-called "special military operation."**<sup>1</sup> In 2014, the strategic use of small groups of Russian special operators and light infantry to infiltrate Ukrainian territory was particularly effective, creating chaos, seizing key terrain, and weakening the morale and effectiveness of Ukrainian border units.<sup>2</sup> Quickly following the infiltration, the main body of pro-Russian separatist forces attacked.<sup>3</sup> In Russian doctrine, infiltration is primarily used in conjunction with an attack. The infiltration force, acting chiefly as a reconnaissance and target acquisition element, seeks to avoid detection while moving deep behind enemy lines to identify high payoff targets such as command and control nodes and artillery firing positions.<sup>4</sup>

**Despite Ukrainian counter-infiltration measures, Russia continues to find infiltration effective at avoiding Ukrainian defenses.** The initial inability of Ukrainian troops to defend against Russian infiltration tactics led the Ukrainians to adjust their doctrine, organization, and training to mitigate the threat. Beginning in 2014, the Ukrainian Army resurrected Soviet-era Spetsnaz units, specifically designed to counter Russian sabotage, reconnaissance, and infiltration teams.<sup>5</sup> In early 2023, the Russian military deployed small formations of elite soldiers to the Bakhmut area using urban infiltration tactics, a contemporary example of the tactic's effectiveness, resulting in significant gains for the Russian forces.<sup>6</sup> Russian forces will likely continue to employ infiltration tactics, given their effective results.



U.S. Army  
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**Despite lacking modern examples, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has also long employed infiltration.** The PLA first started using infiltration techniques in the Chinese Civil War, which culminated in 1949, and the Korean War in the early 1950s. The Korean War tactical fight typically involved close combat and taking advantage of night operations to enable infiltration whenever possible.<sup>7</sup> A notable example of PLA infiltration tactics occurred in November 1950 when large columns of Chinese soldiers used the cover of darkness and concealment from terrain to advance on foot along Korean ridgelines to attack Combined Forces Command elements in the flank and rear.<sup>8</sup> The surprise assault was devastating, annihilating American forces. The U.S. Army's Regimental Combat Team 31 was among the units bearing the brunt of the onslaught, falling from 2,500 Soldiers to only 385 combat-ready men over five days of fighting.<sup>9</sup>

**Today, PLA doctrine has evolved to emphasize infiltration tactics alongside penetrations or other assaults to isolate and eradicate enemy units.** A light infantry depth attack group may infiltrate one flank of an enemy formation, while an armor-heavy depth attack group conducts an aggressive penetration of another flank. Successfully executing an infiltration attack demands significant skill and initiative from small-unit leaders. These leaders are tasked with identifying enemy weak points and then choosing their avenues of approach and methods of attack. The PLA also heavily relies on raids as part of its infiltration tactics against conventional forces.<sup>10</sup> China's infiltration strategy differs significantly from Russia's in that it tries to defeat the enemy with direct contact while the Russian tactic is for infiltration forces to remain undetected, performing reconnaissance and acting as spotters for artillery.

**Infiltration is best used to perform reconnaissance, identify targets, conduct raids, and execute ambushes, and best conducted by small formations of dismounted troops, primarily infantry, with the skills and experience to move with stealth, using the terrain and natural environment to avoid detection.**<sup>11</sup> Born out of necessity during World War I, infiltration has evolved over the 20th century and remains a potent tactic today. Infiltration is best used to perform reconnaissance, identify targets, conduct raids, and execute ambushes.<sup>12</sup> Penetrating enemy lines undetected is difficult with large formations and vehicles. Thus, infiltration forces are usually small teams on foot, possess limited combat power, and can only cover short distances while moving relatively slowly. Infiltration forces typically move at night and must proceed cautiously, with limited radio communications to avoid detection.

**Infiltration attacks inherently require less force concentration than other offensive actions.** However, they require skill in execution, as enemy detection changes the action from an infiltration to a frontal assault. An infiltration force frequently avoids using supporting artillery and other enablers due to the need for secrecy and concealment. However, information warfare and deception operations may provide vital support by deceiving the enemy about the strength or direction of the attack or by diverting enemy reconnaissance focus elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> A successful infiltration creates the element of surprise, which can cause the enemy to panic, feel isolated, and potentially flee.

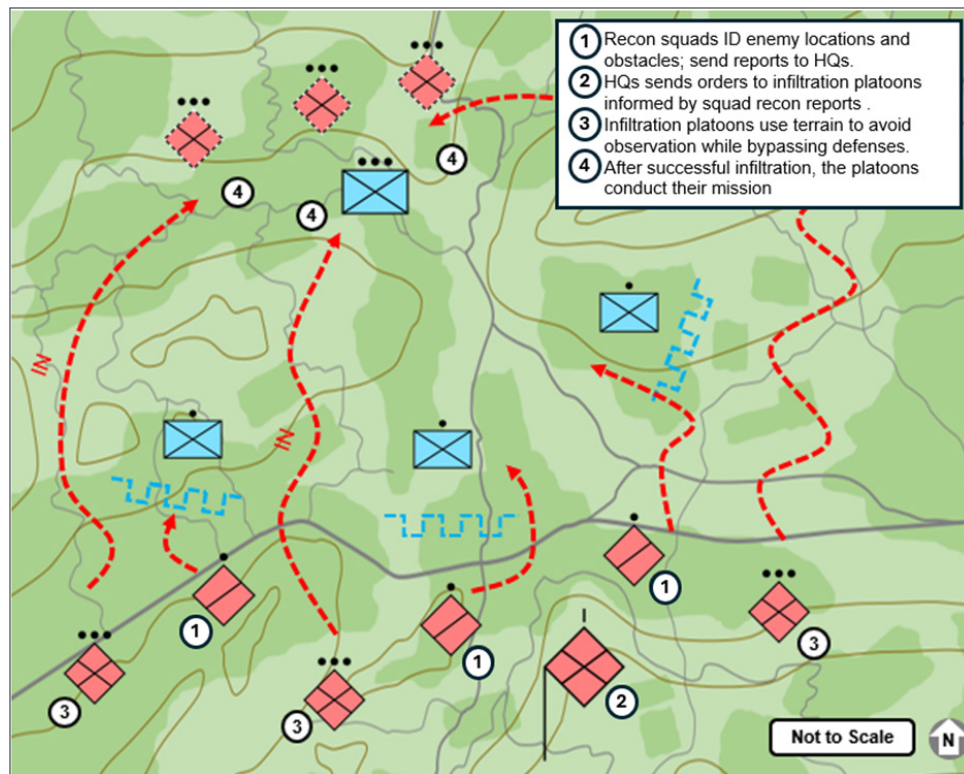


Figure 1: PLA infantry company conducting infiltration.<sup>14</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS FOR LARGE-SCALE COMBAT OPERATIONS

***Future large-scale combat environments pose significant challenges to infiltration operations due to increased battlefield transparency and lethality.***

- The proliferation of drones, signals intelligence, and space-based sensors creates a “transparent battlefield,” making undetected movement difficult. While adverse weather conditions offer some concealment, the persistent surveillance by UAS equipped with advanced optics makes detection increasingly likely. Additionally, rapid targeting enabled by networked sensors, combined with precise long-range fires and AI-assisted munitions, significantly increases the risk and likely reduce the success rate of infiltration attempts.
- To counter this, enemy forces may utilize multi-domain attacks (e.g., cyber, electronic warfare, artillery) to disrupt surveillance prior to infiltration. Additionally, the enemy will likely exploit concealed routes and employ portable counter-UAS systems for protection.

***To better defend against infiltration, defending units should consider all areas they cannot observe during the day, night, and inclement weather.*** Once those unobserved routes are identified, defenders could adjust the security plan by repositioning troops, placing additional obstacles, employing traditional ISR assets, unattended ground sensors, trip flares, or other early warning devices to enhance observation of suspected infiltration routes. Active patrolling can also be effective at thwarting infiltration attempts.

***The U.S. Army Opposing Force (OPFOR) can enhance training by incorporating Chinese PLA infiltration strategies as detailed in ATP 7-100.3 as part of the OPFOR plan.*** OPFOR employment of infiltration tactics would simultaneously support educating the training audience on realistic doctrinal threat tactics, while also driving stimulating training audience with the requirement to protect rear areas—a likely target in future large scale combat operations.

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*The TRADOC G-2's mission is the Operational Environment. We create the conditions necessary to research it; we define it; we understand it; we apply it; and we export it. We know the enemy and make sure our customers do too.*

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