

As Russia continues attack on Bakhmut, Ukraine decides to fight back, not fall back



UK Defence Intelligence update on Russian attacks and troop locations as of today.

On Feb. 24 last year, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that “in execution of the treaties of friendship and mutual assistance with the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Lugansk People’s Republic, ratified by the Federal Assembly on February 22, I made a decision to carry out a special military operation.” The purpose of the “special military operation,” he said, was “to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation. It is not our plan to occupy the Ukrainian territory. We do not intend to impose anything on anyone by force.... The current events have nothing to do with a desire to infringe on the interests of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. They are connected with defending Russia from those who have taken Ukraine hostage and are trying to use it against our country and our people. I reiterate: We are acting to defend ourselves from the threats created for us and from a worse peril than what is happening now.”

The “special military operation” was in fact a large-scale multi-pronged invasion of Ukraine from neighboring Belarus, its partner in their two-country “Union State,” in the north; Crimea, annexed in 2014, in the south; and Russian territory adjacent to eastern and northeastern Ukraine, accompanied by intensive strikes on many cities throughout the country. Over the next two months, Russia attacked Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kherson, Dnipro, Mariupol, Odesa, Lviv, and other cities with artillery and missiles, in the process destroying apartment buildings, schools and hospitals, and killing or injuring many thousands of men,

women and children, and displacing millions, many of whom fled the country. Yet despite all the attacks on the cities and all the atrocities committed on the ground, the Russian forces were unable to overcome the fierce defense mobilized by the Ukrainian military and its citizens in the Kyiv region and were forced to pull back, and in late March, having failed to capture Kyiv, Russia announced a shift in the focus of the “special military operation” to “achieving the main goal, the liberation of Donbass.”

Over the past year, Russia has held, at various times, much of Kharkiv, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia regions as well as roughly half of Donetsk region, and last fall, after having been driven out of Kharkiv region, Russia formally annexed the other four regions. But despite having shifted the focus of the “special military operation” to the “liberation of Donbass” nearly a year ago, Russia still does not control all of Donetsk region. Indeed, the contact line between Russian and Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine has changed very little since Ukraine took back the city of Kherson and the portion of that region west of the Dnipro River in early November. Since then, the battle has continued in and around Bakhmut and other cities and towns in the Donbas, which consists of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, but with very little change in the territory held by each side.

The fact that the contact line is relatively stable doesn't of course mean there is no conflict along the line. There has in fact been conflict in several areas along the contact line. One focal point in particular has been Bakhmut, a small city with a pre-war population of almost 75,000. As Russian forces have sought to encircle and eventually take Bakhmut in recent days, many commentators, perhaps perplexed that Russia has fought so hard, and taken so many casualties, trying to take it and perplexed, also, that Ukraine has been willing to take so many casualties in trying to prevent Russia from taking it, have said that Bakhmut has no strategic value. What they ignore is that the city is situated at the junction of roads that, if controlled by Russia, would increase its ability to move toward several larger cities in the northwestern portion of Donetsk region – most notably, via the M03, toward Sloviansk (pre-war population 110,000) about 45 kilometers northwest of Bakhmut and Kramatorsk (pre-war population 160,000) only 15 kilometers south of Sloviansk. And controlling Bakhmut would also provide access, via the TO504, to Kostyantynivka (prewar population 70,000) 30 kilometers to the southwest.

Last night, in his nightly address, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Ukrainian troops were in a "painful and difficult" battle in the Donbas and referred specifically to the ongoing conflict in and around Bakhmut as well in other towns and cities in the region: “I would like to pay special tribute to the bravery, strength and resilience of the soldiers fighting in the Donbas. Thank you, guys! I thank all the soldiers, guardsmen and border guards who are defending our country in the Bakhmut, Vuhledar, Avdiivka, Siversk, Svatove, Lyman and Zaporizhzhia directions.”

Today, Zelenskyy held a meeting of the Staff of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief at which, his office reported, “the commanders of the operational and strategic groups of troops reported on the situation on the main frontline directions. The members of the Staff reviewed the situation in Bakhmut in particular detail. Assessing the course of the defense

operation, the President asked Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Valerii Zaluzhnyi and Commander of the Khortytsia operational and strategic group of troops Oleksandr Syrskyi about further actions in the Bakhmut direction. They spoke in favor of continuing the defense operation and further strengthening our positions in Bakhmut. In addition, the parties discussed the supply of weapons and equipment and their distribution to operational directions.”

And so, as late winter turns to early spring and the ground in eastern Ukraine begins to thaw and turn into the thick mud that makes the movement of military equipment difficult, Ukraine’s defense of Bakhmut continues.

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