

The battle for Bakhmut continues



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.”

The two “republics” were formed by pro-Russian separatists in portions of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine (the darker-shaded areas in the map above) in April 2014, soon after the events in Crimea that began in late February when Russian troops stationed in several bases in Crimea took over key locations after the Ukrainian parliament removed pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich from office. A new pro-Russian government was installed in Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, a joint declaration of independence was issued, and on March 16, 2014 a referendum was held in which 97 per cent voted in favor of becoming part of the Russian Federation – hardly a surprise given not only the presence of the important Russian naval base at Sevastopol as well as a number of other Russian military bases in Crimea but also the fact that, according to the most recent census, 58 percent of those living in Crimea were ethnic Russians and 77 percent identified Russian as their native language. The day after the referendum Crimea and Sevastopol declared their independence and requested accession to the Russian Federation, treaties of

accession were signed the next day, and on March 21 the treaties were ratified and both became members of the Russian Federation. No doubt many in Donetsk and Luhansk, in both of which substantial portions of the population were ethnic Russian (38 percent in Donetsk, 39 percent in Luhansk) and identified Russian as their native language (75 percent in Donetsk, 69 percent in Luhansk) hoped that by creating their “republics” they might someday, like Sevastopol and Crimea, become part of the Russian Federation.

Putin’s “special military operation” turned out to be a large-scale multi-pronged invasion of Ukraine from Belarus in the north, Crimea 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 defense mobilized by the Ukrainian military and were forced to pull back, and in late March last year, after 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, it currently controls only 60 percent of the territory of that region, and in the past four months since Ukraine took back the city of Kherson and the portion of that region west of the Dnipro River, the contact line between the Russian and Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine has changed very little.

The fact that the contact line in eastern Ukraine has remained largely unchanged in recent months doesn’t mean there hasn’t been conflict along the line. Indeed, there has been a good deal of conflict at various points along the line, although little territory has changed hands. One focal point of the conflict for the past several weeks has been Bakhmut, a small city with a pre-war population of about 75,000. Russian forces have sought to encircle the city by taking territory to the east, north and south of the city while also conducting repeated frontal assaults with troops of the Wagner Group, a private mercenary force created by Yevgeny Prigozhin and consisting of convicts who have been released from prison to serve in the force.

Both the Russian and the Ukrainian forces have taken large numbers of casualties in the battle in and around Bakhmut, and many commentators as well as some high-ranking American officials have been perplexed that Ukraine has been willing to remain in Bakhmut and continue taking substantial casualties in order to hold a city that has little strategic value and is by now largely deserted and destroyed. But those who suggest that Ukraine should

withdraw from Bakhmut ignore the fact that it is situated at a critical 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. Controlling Bakhmut would also provide access, via the TO504, to Kostyantynivka (prewar population 70,000) 30 kilometers to the southwest.

On Mar. 5, 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."

Last Monday, 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 Syrskiy 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."

Last Tuesday, in an interview with CNN, Zelenskyy made it clear why Ukraine is trying to hold Bakhmut, as costly as that may be in terms of casualties: "This is tactical for us. We understand that after Bakhmut they could go further. They could go to Kramatorsk, they could go to Sloviansk, it would be open road for the Russians after Bakhmut to other towns in Ukraine, in the Donetsk direction. That's why our guys are standing there... I had a meeting with the chief of staff yesterday and the chief military commanders online and offline... and they all say that we have to stand strong in Bakhmut. Of course we have to think about the lives of our military. But we have to do whatever we can whilst we're getting weapons, supplies and our army is getting ready for the counter-offensive. The military sees for themselves that we have to stay strong there despite the fact that Russia ruined the whole city and everything there." Also last Tuesday, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu made it clear that Russia is attacking Bakhmut for the same reason Ukraine is defending it. Speaking in a conference call with military commanders, he said, "The liberation of Artyomovsk [the Soviet-era name for Bakhmut] continues. This city is a major defense line for Ukrainian troops in Donbass. Its control will help develop a further offensive deep into the Ukrainian army's defenses."

On Thursday, Syrskyi reiterated the message he had delivered to Zelenskyy in the meeting three days earlier: Speaking of Bakhmut, he said, “Each day of the city’s defense allows us to gain time to prepare reserves and prepare for future offensive operations. At the same time, in the battles for this fortress, the enemy loses the most prepared and combat-capable part of his army — Wagner’s assault troops. Prigozhin's statements once again confirm that after the capture of Bakhmut by the Wagnerites, the enemy’s hands will be freed and he will be able to launch a large-scale offensive with the use of army and airborne units on combat equipment. This once again proves the very important role of Bakhmut in the overall defense system of our group.”

On Saturday, British Defence Intelligence reported that over the last several days the Russian forces in the Wagner Group had taken control of most of the eastern part of Bakhmut and that the Bakhmutka River, which flows north-south through the center of the city, now marks the front line. It said the Ukrainian forces which hold the western portion of the city had demolished key bridges over the river and are able to fire from fortified buildings in the city, which is likely to make it “highly challenging” for the Wagner forces attempting to continue their frontal assault from the east. But it noted that the Ukrainian forces and their supply lines to the west remain vulnerable to continued Russian attempts to outflank them from both the north and the south.

Also on Saturday, in a visit to Ukrainian troops in Bakhmut, Syrskyi, the commander of Ukraine’s ground forces, reiterated the point made earlier by Zelenskyy that defending Bakhmut against the continuing Russian attack is necessary in order to buy time for preparing Ukraine’s spring counteroffensive: “The real heroes now are the defenders who hold the eastern front on their shoulders and inflict maximum losses on the enemy. The defense of Bakhmut gives us a chance to accumulate reserves and prepare for the spring counteroffensive, which is not far off.”

On Sunday, Syrskyi said, “Wagner’s assault units are advancing from several directions, trying to break through the defenses of our troops and advance to the central districts of the city. All enemy attempts to capture the town are repelled by artillery, tanks, and other firepower.” But, he said, “the situation around Bakhmut remains difficult.” On the other side, Prigozhin said the same thing in a post on social media: “The situation in Bakhmut is difficult, very difficult. The enemy is battling for every meter. The closer we are to the city center, the more difficult the battles get and the more artillery there is...Ukrainians are throwing endless reserves into the fight.”

Last night in a video address, Zelenskyy said, “As always, today I was in touch with our commanders and intelligence. It is very tough in the east, very painful. We need to destroy the enemy's military might, and we will. Bilohorivka and Maryinka, Avdiivka and Bakhmut, Vuhledar and Kamyanka - and all other places where our future is being decided. Where our future, the future of all Ukrainians, is being fought for. I am grateful to each and every one who is now in combat! Thank you to everyone who defends their positions and fights for Ukraine and brothers-in-arms! Thank you to everyone who never lets down those who are next to them on the frontline! Today, I would like to commend the warriors of the 92nd

separate mechanized brigade for their successful actions in the area of Bakhmut. Thank you, guys!”

Today, the battle for Bakhmut – and Ukraine – continues.

David R. Cameron
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