

As the battle for Bakhmut continues, Ukraine prepares its counteroffensive



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

If one judged only on the basis of the day-to-day headlines over the past few weeks, one might think the war in Ukraine has boiled down to a prolonged battle for one small city in eastern Ukraine, Bakhmut, with the Ukrainian forces continuing to hold it against waves of conscripted Russian troops supplemented with the released convicts and other mercenaries of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin's private military company. But while the battle continues in and around that city, the war continues as well throughout eastern Ukraine. And while the contact line between the Russian and Ukrainian forces appears, from a distance, to be largely unchanged, in fact there have been some significant changes in the territory held by the two sides over the past month.

If one compares today's British Defence Intelligence map of Russian attacks and troop locations (above) with the map issued a month ago, one notices a number of changes in the territory held by the two sides. In the northwestern portion of Luhansk region in the north of the Donbas, Russian forces now control an area adjacent to Kharkiv region that was contested a month ago and as well as a small piece of territory in Kharkiv region that also was contested a month ago. Ukraine on the other hand has taken back a thin slice of territory just to the south along the western edge of Luhansk region. But further south, along the border between the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, Russia has taken a substantial portion of the territory west of Rubizhne and Sievierodonetsk that a month ago was being contested by the Russian and Ukrainian forces. And Russia is clearly continuing to push in the direction of Lyman, which had pre-war population of about 20,000, and Sloviansk, which had a pre-war population of 105,000.

Continuing southward along the contact line, Bakhmut, which had a pre-war population of 70,000, has been the focal point of a multi-pronged Russian attack for the past several months. The Russian forces have attempted to encircle the city, which is by now largely destroyed, while also attacking it directly from the east. They have taken territory immediately to the north and west of the city but thus far haven't been able to completely encircle it and, in so doing, cut the supply lines of the Ukrainian forces attempting to hold it. However, they have taken much of the eastern part of the city. Last Sunday, after taking the administrative building of the city government, which is located in the eastern part of the city, Prigozhin broadcast a video of himself raising the Russian flag and claiming that, by taking that building, his troops had taken the city. Ukraine immediately disputed the claim, and the battle for the city continued.

On Saturday, British Defence Intelligence reported the Russian forces had regained some momentum after their attack on Bakhmut had largely stalled in the last few weeks and had quite likely advanced into the center of the city and had taken the west bank of the Bakhmutka River, which flows in a northerly direction through the center of the city. It also reported that the key supply route for the Ukrainian forces in the city is now "severely threatened" and that the Wagner forces had been reinforced with Russian regular troops. On Sunday, Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, the commander of the Ukrainian ground forces, visited the frontline areas and later said Russia had "switched to so-called scorched earth tactics from Syria. It is destroying buildings and positions with air strikes and artillery fire." The situation in the city was, he said, "difficult but controllable." But he noted, as did British Defence Intelligence, that Russia was bringing in special forces and airborne assault units to assist in the attack since the Wagner Group had become "exhausted." Yesterday, Prigozhin disputed that characterization and said the Group controlled more than 80 percent of Bakhmut, a figure the Ukraine military command rejected.

Continuing southward from Bakhmut along the contact line, the Ukrainian forces have taken a sizeable piece of territory west of the highway between Bakhmut and Horlivka, about 25 miles to the south. And continuing further southward, those forces have also taken a substantial piece of territory to the north, west and south of Avdiivka, a small city with a pre-war population of about 30,000 but, importantly, only 15 miles north of Donetsk city, the administrative capital of the region, which had a pre-war population of 900,000, and the adjacent city of Makiivka, which had a pre-war population of 340,000. Avdiivka, like Bakhmut, is largely destroyed; indeed, the Ukrainian governor of Donetsk region said, "The Russians have turned Avdiivka into a total ruin." But given its proximity to the Donetsk- Makiivka conurbation, if and when the Russian forces gain full control of Bakhmut, they will likely turn their attention to Avdiivka, if only to ensure their continued control of Donetsk and Makiivka. For the same reason, they have been attacking Ukrainian forces in and around Marinka, which had a pre-war population of about 10,000 but, importantly, is only 12 miles southwest of Donetsk and on one of the major approaches to Donetsk from the west.

Moving southward along the contact line from Avdiivka and Marinka, after a prolonged, costly, and ultimately unsuccessful assault on the town of Vuhledar, which had a pre-war population of about 15,000, the Russian forces have pulled back from the town as well as from a substantial amount of territory to the east, north, and west of the town. But they have, on the other hand, taken control of roughly half of the territory in the northern portion of Zaporizhzhia region that, a month ago, was being contested by the two sides.

As the battles for Bakhmut and other small cities and towns along the contact line continue, both sides are preparing for Ukraine's long-anticipated spring offensive. In order to retake the territory in eastern Ukraine now held by Russia, Ukraine will need not only more troops but also tanks – many of them. Since the pledges made in January by a number of governments, Ukraine has already received or soon will receive German-made Leopard 2 battle tanks from a number of countries – 18 from Germany, delivered in late March, 14 from Poland, also delivered in March, 10 from Spain, 10 from Sweden, 8 from Canada, 8 from Norway, 4 from Portugal and 3 from Finland, with additional Leopard 2s pledged by some of those and several other countries. The special virtue of the Leopard 2 is that it was specifically designed to fight Russia's T-90 main battle tank. The UK delivered 14 of its Challenger 2 battle tanks in late March and has informally told Ukraine it will send another 14. And the U.S. has committed to sending 31 M1 Abrams battle tanks sometime in the near future. In a recent interview with an Estonian news outlet, Ukraine's defense minister Oleksiy Reznikov said Ukraine's offensive will feature the Leopards and Challengers: "You will see Leopards in a counterattack by the decision of our General Staff. It is already planned in several directions." Asked when the offensive would begin, he indicated it would begin soon after the ground had firmed up after the spring thaw: "In the spring our land is very wet. I think we will see them [the tanks] in April-May."

Both the tanks involved in the Ukrainian offensive and the troops behind them will of course need air cover, and last Wednesday, after meeting in Warsaw with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Polish President Andrzej Duda announced that Poland, which has pledged 14 MiG-29s to Ukraine, had already delivered four of the MiGs, was currently transferring another four, and was preparing the remaining six for transfer soon. And he said that if Ukraine needs more, more will be given: "I think that in the future we will be able to transfer our whole remaining fleet of MiG-29s to Ukraine if there is still such a need." Slovakia has promised Ukraine 13 MiG-29s and delivered the first four two weeks ago.

On the Russian side, in light of the fact that it has experienced substantial casualties – according to some estimates at least 200,000 killed or wounded – the priority as it anticipates Ukraine's forthcoming offensive is mobilizing more troops. According to British Defence Intelligence, Russia is preparing a major military recruitment campaign with the aim of recruiting as many as 400,000 new troops. But it's not at all certain, given what awaits them, that 400,000 will volunteer. In the meantime, today the State Duma and the Federation Council, the two chambers of the Federal Assembly, approved

legislation that will raise the upper age limit for the twice-a-year conscription program from 27 to 30. (The lower age limit, 18, will be raised to 21 at a later date.) The legislation also stipulates that draft notices will henceforth take effect when posted electronically on a state website rather than when delivered to a home address, to ensure that they take effect regardless of where the draftee lives and can't be evaded by leaving that address.

Ukraine's counteroffensive may begin in a few days or a few weeks; other than Reznikov's "April-May," we don't know precisely when. Nor do we know precisely what Ukraine will do – where and how it will attack – and what Russia will do in response, especially in view of the extraordinary leak of U.S. intelligence documents that came to light last week. And we don't know, of course, what the result of Ukraine's offensive and Russia's response to it will be. The only thing we know for sure is that many more Ukrainians and Russians will die before this war ends.

David R. Cameron
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