

As Ukraine prepares counteroffensive, Russians continue to advance in Bakhmut



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

Representatives of the 46 countries – the 31 members of NATO and 15 other countries – that make up the Ukraine Defense Contact Group met Friday at Ramstein Air Base in Germany to discuss the additional military assistance Ukraine will need in its spring counteroffensive. They met a day after NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg met in Kyiv with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who urged him to assist Ukraine in overcoming the reticence of some NATO members to providing Ukraine the long-range weapons, planes, artillery, and armored vehicles it will need in order to drive Russia out of Ukraine. Zelenskyy also urged that NATO agree to membership for Ukraine – something Stoltenberg said would indeed happen at some point: “Let me be clear,” he said, “Ukraine’s rightful place is in the Euro-Atlantic family. Ukraine’s rightful place is in NATO.”

But at Ramstein, Stoltenberg also made it clear that the focus of the Contact Group meeting was not on Ukraine’s future membership in NATO but, rather, on ensuring that it wins the war: “The main focus now is of course on how to ensure that Ukraine prevails. Without a sovereign, independent Ukraine, there is no meaning in discussing membership.” At the meeting, Ukraine Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov made it clear that, in order for the forthcoming offensive to succeed, Ukraine needs, in addition to more tanks and armored vehicles, additional air defense systems, more artillery ammunition, and more training for its forces. Prior to the meeting, the U.S. announced it will provide an additional \$325 million in military assistance, including more ammunition for the High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) it gave Ukraine that have proven to be so effective as well as advanced missiles and anti-tank mines.

And at the meeting, the U.S. said that by the end of May it will deliver 31 Abrams battle tanks to Germany to be used in training the Ukrainian troops who will eventually operate the 31 Abrams M1A1 tanks that are now being refurbished in the U.S. and will be delivered to Ukraine when they are ready for use.

Meanwhile, in Ukraine the battle for Bakhmut continues. If one compares today's British Defence Intelligence map of Russian attacks and troop locations in Ukraine (above) with the map from a week ago, there is only one significant change: Some of the territory immediately to the north and northeast of Bakhmut that was contested by the forces a week ago is now controlled by the Russian forces while the territory immediately to the south of Bakhmut that was controlled a week ago by the Ukrainian forces is now contested by the forces. And if the map were detailed enough to show the territory in and around Bakhmut, it would show the Russian forces, which over the past two weeks have taken the eastern portion and then the central portion of that largely destroyed city, moving into the western portion of the city while also continuing their effort to encircle the city and, in so doing, cut the supply lines of the Ukrainian forces still in the city.

On Friday, in the Russian defense ministry's daily briefing, Lt. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said, "In the Donetsk direction, the assault teams continued battles in the western part of the city of Artyomovsk [i.e., Bakhmut]. Airborne forces are thwarting the enemy's attempts to counter-attack on the flanks and are rendering support to the assault teams in capturing the city." Also on Friday, the military adviser to the head of the Donetsk People's Republic (the pseudo-state created by pro-Russian separatists in that region) said, "Wagner PMC [the Wagner Group, the private military company of Yevgeny Prigozhin] fighters have reached the Artyomovsk-Chasiv Yar highway that was used to supply the Ukrainian battlegroup. [Chasiv Yar is a small city just west of Bakhmut.] They have several hundred meters under control, which makes supplies to the garrison impossible." On Friday, Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Maliar said on Telegram, "If you look at the entire map of Ukraine, the situation is volatile and, in fact, this is how it should be perceived... Bakhmut remains the hottest spot. The enemy is making it so. Fierce fighting is taking place there. The enemy is attacking. They are destroying houses and buildings. In some areas, it is advancing in some places."

At Saturday's defense ministry briefing, Konashenkov said, "In the Donetsk direction, the assault detachments have liberated three quarters in the west part of the city of Artyomovsk. Airborne troops have been blocking the enemy on the flanks and supporting the assault detachments to take control over the city." In his briefing on Sunday, Konashenkov said, "In the Donetsk direction, assault teams liberated two areas in the western parts of the city of Artyomovsk in the past 24 hours. The Russian Airborne Force units rendered support to the assault teams in the northern and southern districts of the city." In his briefing yesterday, Konashenkov said, "In the Donetsk direction, assault teams continue combat operations in the western districts of the city of Artyomovsk. Operational/tactical and army aviation aircraft and artillery from the

southern battlegroup jointly with Airborne Force units rendered support to the assault teams and thwarted the enemy's attempts to counter-attack on the flanks. ...In the area of the settlement of Bogdanovka in the Donetsk People's Republic, a strike was delivered against the enemy's reserves advancing towards the city of Artyomovsk." In his daily briefing today, Konashenkov reiterated the message of the last several days: "In the Donetsk direction, the assault teams continued their active operations for destroying the enemy in the western part of the city of Artyomovsk. Airborne forces, operational/tactical and army aviation are rendering direct support to the assault teams in capturing the city and thwarting the enemy's attempts to deploy reserves there."

On Sunday, after visiting the military units holding Bakhmut, Ukrainian Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, the commander of the Ground Forces of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, said on Telegram, under the caption "Bakhmut frontline. Our defense continues," "I travelled the entire line of contact and visited military units holding the entire Bakhmut front. We are working with commanders and soldiers to plan operations, assaults, and defense, and are controlling the situation on the ground....We are defeating the enemy, often unexpectedly to them, and we continue to hold strategic positions. The Russians are suffering huge losses, we are destroying their personnel and offensive potential."

While many in the West have been perplexed by Ukraine's continuing defense of a city that has already been largely destroyed, in an interview Sunday Zelenskyy made it clear why Ukraine has fought so hard to retain Bakhmut, emphasizing in particular that its capture could serve as a bridgehead for Russia to launch attacks on the two larger cities to the west of Bakhmut – Kramatorsk and Sloviansk: "It is impossible for us to give up on Bakhmut because this will expand the battlefield and give the Russian forces and Wagner chances to seize more of our lands....I cannot describe the situation as good, but we are fighting. We are stronger than we were a year ago." Alluding to the forthcoming offensive, he said, "Our army is getting ready, and we are doing everything we can in order to make it stronger." And in a message to Ukraine's allies, he made it clear why it is in their interest to support Ukraine now: "To our allies, support us because, first and foremost, this is a cheap price that you have to pay because Russia will go beyond what it has already done."

The Russian vise in and around Bakhmut is tightening and the Russian forces may soon take the city. Nevertheless, soon – very soon – the Ukrainian counteroffensive will begin.

David R. Cameron
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