

## As Bakhmut siege continues, Ukraine prepares to launch counteroffensive



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

All last week Russian forces pounded the city of Bakhmut, one of the focal points, along with Avdiivka and several other small cities, of their efforts for the past several months to take the Donbas, the eastern Ukrainian industrial region consisting of Luhansk and Donetsk regions. The Russian forces, including Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Wagner Group, a private military company composed of former convicts released into service with Wagner and other mercenaries, have been trying for months to take the city, which once had a population of 70,000 but now is virtually uninhabited and largely destroyed. Several weeks ago, Prigozhin’s forces took the eastern portion of the city, then slowly moved into the central portion of the city, and then into part of the western portion, while also attempting to encircle the city and cut off the supply lines to the Ukrainian forces that continue to hold the western portion of the city and the territory immediately to the west and southwest of the city. But the Ukrainian forces continue to hold most of the western portion of the city, in part because giving up the city would open a pathway for the Russian forces to the larger industrial cities of Kramatorsk and Sloviansk about 30 miles to the northwest.

In a statement posted on Telegram yesterday, Ukrainian Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, Ukraine’s Commander of Ground Forces, after visiting the troops in Bakhmut on Sunday, said, “The situation is quite difficult. At the same time, in certain parts of the city, the enemy was counterattacked by our units and left some positions.” New Russian units, including paratroopers and members of the Wagner Group are, he said, being “constantly thrown into battle. But the enemy is unable to take control of the city. We

continue, despite all the forecasts and advice, to hold Bakhmut. We give an opportunity for our reserves to prepare and we are preparing for further actions ourselves.”

While the siege of Bakhmut continues, Ukraine is preparing its long-anticipated counteroffensive. In a press conference Friday, Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov announced the country is almost ready to launch the counteroffensive, pending the arrival of some additional pledged weapons and equipment, some additional training of military personnel in some weapons systems, and the necessary weather conditions, meaning dry terrain after the spring rains: “The preparations of the Defense Forces for a counteroffensive are at their final stage. The preparations are coming to an end as, in addition to weapons and military equipment, there must be training for our military personnel in how to use them. We have received state-of-the-art systems... Let me remind you that in addition to the tank coalition (which primarily includes Leopard 2 tanks and Challengers, with Leopard 1s coming later), we are also waiting for Abrams.... I don’t think the Abrams will be used in this counteroffensive. But our crews have left for training on them. We also have many armored vehicles of various types, particularly armored personnel carriers and infantry fighting vehicles. We have Bradleys, Marders, Strykers and CV 90s from Sweden. We are finishing up some more training courses there. The equipment itself has been announced, prepared and partially delivered. And then there is the equipment on which the training programs are being completed, and then the crews will stay with it when the time and place are determined. But let’s say that in a general sense, we are more than ready. Globally speaking, we are to a high percentage ready.” He said the General Staff of the Armed Forces will decide when and where the counteroffensive will start: “If in a global sense, in a high-percentage mode, we are ready, then the question is for the General Staff, for the command. As soon as there is God’s will, the weather, and the decision of the commanders, we will act.”

In an interview Saturday with Finnish, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian journalists, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said, “There will be a counteroffensive, and I believe it will be a success, and we will finally liberate our territories. I’m not ready to say when it will happen or how. Many things depend on us, but there are many details in the supply of certain weapons... We strive to preserve as many lives as possible, so weapons are crucial.” He said “there were moments” when Ukraine’s partners were letting the country down regarding supplying equipment. When asked if the counteroffensive will start before Ukraine receives F-16s or other fighter jets, he said, “Frankly speaking, it would help us a lot. But we also understand that we can’t drag it [the start of the counteroffensive] out, which is why we’ll start before we receive F-16s or other models.” He also stressed the impact of the weather on the start of the counteroffensive.

On Sunday, in a sign that the counteroffensive may soon begin, Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, revealed in his Telegram feed that he had met with U.S. Gen. Christopher G. Cavoli, the Supreme Commander of

the NATO Joint Armed Forces in Europe (SACEUR). He said they had held a “comprehensive meeting” that covered the full range of “future scenarios”: “I spoke in detail about the operational situation along the entire front line, and described possible scenarios, threats and prerequisites for our future actions. We set ourselves a goal: to prepare in such a way as to fulfil certain tasks as much as possible.” He said they also discussed Ukraine’s need for a wide range of weapons and anti-aircraft defense systems, and the need for both the timely delivery of sufficient ammunition and equipment and the continued training of the Ukrainian forces in the use of that equipment. He said they agreed to continue to maintain their dialogue and to work to strengthen Ukraine’s defense capabilities.

When will the counteroffensive begin and where will it begin? How will Russia respond? Will Ukraine take back some or all of the territory now held by Russia? Will the counteroffensive lead to an end to the war? Or will it lead instead to a further escalation of the conflict? Obviously, we don’t know the answers to these questions. But soon – very soon – we will know.

David R. Cameron  
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