

As Ukrainian artillery signals likely focus of counteroffensive, Prigozhin announces withdrawal from Bakhmut nest week



UK Defence Intelligence update on Russian attacks & troop locations as of yesterday.

In a press conference last Friday, Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov announced the country is almost ready to launch its much-anticipated 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.... But let’s say that in a general sense, we are more than ready. Globally speaking, we are to a high percentage ready.... 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.”

Neither Reznikov nor anyone else has said precisely when and where the counteroffensive will begin. But there have been some unmistakable signals in the last several days not only that the counteroffensive will soon begin but also about where it is likely to begin. On Thursday, an official of the Donetsk People’s Republic, the pseudo-state created in part of that region by pro-Russian separatists, said, “There is a significant increase in enemy artillery preparation” as well as reconnaissance-in-force operations and intensified attacks on a number of cities and towns along the contact line, with some of them being under continued artillery fire. Another official reported a reconnaissance-in-force operation toward Orikhiv, a small city in Zaporizhzhia region

about 30 miles southeast of the city of Zaporizhzhia, after “massive artillery preparation.” And yesterday, the Russian acting head of Zaporizhzhia region, which was annexed by Russia last fall, announced that residents of 18 settlements in the region, including Enerhodar where the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant is located, will be relocated because of “intensified shelling attacks” by Ukrainian forces: “In the past few days,” he said, “the enemy has stepped up shelling of settlements close to the front line. I have therefore made a decision to evacuate first of all children and parents, elderly people, disabled people and hospital patients.”

We don’t know when and where Ukraine’s counteroffensive will begin. But based on what little is known – most notably, the unusually heavy Ukrainian artillery fire, coupled with reconnaissance operations, this week along the contact line that separates the forces in Zaporizhzhia region and the fact that Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu visited the headquarters of the Southern Group of Russian forces in southeastern Ukraine yesterday to check on their preparations for the Ukrainian offensive – the best guess is that it will begin along the contact line in Zaporizhzhia region, possibly as soon as next week or the week after – provided, of course, the ground has dried out sufficiently after the spring rains to allow tanks and other heavy vehicles to move easily.

While the reconnaissance operations and artillery fire continued along the contact line in Zaporizhzhia, the big news in the war yesterday came from Bakhmut, the nearly-destroyed city in Donetsk region where Russian forces, including the Wagner Group, the private military company of Yevgeny Prigozhin, have been advancing westward within the city, but very slowly and at great cost in terms of casualties. On Thursday, Lt. Gen. Igor Konashenkov, the Russian Defense Ministry spokesman, reported that “assault teams captured two urban areas and continued destroying the enemy in the western part of the city of Artyomovsk [Russia’s name for Bakhmut]. Operational/tactical and army aviation and artillery from the southern battlegroup struck units of the Ukrainian army’s 60th, 93rd and 54th motorized infantry brigades near the...southwestern outskirts of Artyomovsk...Russian Airborne Force units kept thwarting the enemy’s attempts to counter-attack from the flanks.” And in yesterday’s briefing, Konashenkov reiterated what has come to be a nearly identical daily update on the battle for Bakhmut: “The assault teams continued their offensive operations in the western part of the city of Artyomovsk.” But he also noted, importantly, that “In the area of the settlement of Chasov Yar [a town about six miles west of Bakhmut] the bridge along which the Ukrainian military attempted to supply ammunition and deploy reserves to Artyomovsk was destroyed.”

But the big news from Bakhmut yesterday came not from the Russian defense ministry about the continuing battle for the western portion of the city but, rather, from Prigozhin himself in an extraordinary announcement that followed an equally extraordinary video statement. In the video, Prigozhin, surrounded by a large number of bodies of Wagner fighters, said, “These are the Wagner PMC guys who died today, still bleeding

fresh. Now listen to me – these are somebody’s fathers and sons. And those who don’t give us ammunition will be in hell. We have a 70 percent ammunition shortage [expletive]! Shoigu! Gerasimov [Chief of the General Staff]! Where is the [expletive] ammunition? Look at them!”

Soon thereafter, Prigozhin released an equally extraordinary statement on Telegram in which he announced that Wagner would transfer responsibility for the battle in Bakhmut to the Russian military as of next Wednesday: “By May 9, 2023 [Victory Day, marking the defeat of Nazi Germany], we were supposed to take Bakhmut, but knowing this, from May 1 near-military bureaucrats practically cut us off from any artillery ammunition. The units of the Russian Defense Ministry, which are designed to cover our flanks, are having a hard time holding them back. Due to the lack of ammunition, our losses are growing exponentially every day. I am officially addressing the Chief of the General Staff, the Minister of Defense, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief and the people of Russia. I declare on behalf of the Wagner PMC fighters, on behalf of the Wagner PMC command, that on May 10, 2023, we are forced to transfer positions in the Bakhmut settlement to units of the Ministry of Defense and withdraw the remnants of the Wagner PMC to the rear camps to lick their wounds. I am withdrawing Wagner units from Bakhmut because, in the absence of ammunition, they are doomed to a senseless death. I appeal openly, since not a single letter of mine was considered, I reported on all the problems starting from March 19, 2022.”

Later yesterday, in another video Prigozhin blamed the military chiefs for the “tens of thousands” of Russians killed and wounded in Ukraine: “The dead and wounded – and that’s tens of thousands of men – lie on the conscience of those who did not give us ammunition, and this is Defense Minister Shoigu and this is Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov. For the tens of thousands killed and wounded, they will bear responsibility before their mothers and children, and I will make sure of that.”

We obviously don’t know whether Prigozhin’s expletive-laced videos and statement had any effect on the flow of ammunition to the Wagner Group. But whether they did or didn’t, today he was back in the war, posting a photo of himself in Bakhmut and saying, “Behind us is Bakhmut, it remains approximately 2.5 km to take- and the city will be taken...The units of PMC Wagner work in lockstep. The enemy does not spare artillery ammunition. A sufficient number of various foreign-made armored vehicles have appeared...The enemy is well equipped, well trained, acts as one and resists with dignity, so we move on.” And so the war in and for Bakhmut continues.

David R. Cameron
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