

## As battle for Bakhmut continues and Ukraine prepares counteroffensive, U.S. agrees to train pilots and approve transfer of F-16s to Ukraine



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

The battle for Bakhmut continued this week as Ukrainian forces pushed back against the Russian forces seeking to take the western portion of the largely destroyed city in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine. But the big news today in the war, of particular importance for the much-anticipated counteroffensive Ukraine is expected to launch in the near future, came not from Bakhmut but rather from Japan, when President Joe Biden told the G7 leaders meeting there that the U.S. has finally agreed to train Ukrainian pilots on F-16 fighter jets and approve the transfer of F-16s to Ukraine. It is axiomatic that a large ground-based counteroffensive such as the one Ukraine is planning – even one that, as this one, will make use of the British Commander, German Leopard, and American Abrams battle tanks that have already been committed – requires air cover in the form of advanced jet fighter planes such as the F-16.

Until very recently, the U.S. had resisted calls from other governments supporting Ukraine that they be allowed to transfer some of their F-16s to Ukraine and that the U.S. not only assist in training Ukrainian pilots in their use but also transfer some of its F-16s to Ukraine as well. But the U.S. had, until today, resisted that argument, claiming that the best way to protect the Ukrainian ground forces in their counteroffensive will be with ground-based defense systems. Ukraine nevertheless persisted in requesting that the U.S. and other governments participate in a “jets coalition” analogous to the earlier “tank coalition,” and on Monday, prior to British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s meeting

at Chequers with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, his office announced the UK would begin “an elementary flying phase for cohorts of Ukrainian pilots to learn basic training.” The training, it said, ‘would go hand in hand with U.K. efforts to work with other countries on providing F16 jets.’ Sunak subsequently announced the UK would also provide Ukraine with hundreds of air defense missiles and other aerial systems, including new long-range attack drones with a range of more than 200 kilometers. But the big news from the UK that day was that it was part of the “jets coalition.”

The G7 leaders, who met today with Zelenskyy, issued a lengthy 10-point statement on Ukraine in which they reaffirmed their commitment to stand together in support of Ukraine; called for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine; expressed their grave concern over Russia’s seizure of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant; expressed their support for the Ukraine Defense Contact Group in coordinating military and defense assistance; reaffirmed their support for assisting the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine; expressed their support for the continuing effort to fight corruption and reform the justice system in Ukraine; endorsed the imposition of coordinated economic sanctions and other economic actions that would further restrict Russia’s access to their economies; agreed to continue to take steps to ensure that Russia pays for the long-term reconstruction of Ukraine; reiterated their commitment to hold those responsible for the war accountable under international law; and reaffirmed their commitment to address the needs of other countries that have been damaged by Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine.

But as important as those commitments are – and all of them are obviously very important – undoubtedly the most dramatic commitment made at today’s G7 meeting was that of Biden, who told his colleagues the U.S. will support providing advanced warplanes, including F-16s, to Ukraine and will support efforts to train Ukrainian pilots on those planes. According to an American official, Biden said the U.S. “will support a joint effort with our allies and partners to train Ukrainian pilots on fourth-generation fighter aircraft, including F-16s, to further strengthen and improve the capabilities of the Ukrainian Air Force. As the training takes place over the coming months, our coalition of countries participating in this effort will decide when to actually provide jets, how many we will provide, and who will provide them.” In short, the U.S. is part of the “jets coalition.” That is very good news for Ukraine.

Meanwhile, in Bakhmut and elsewhere in eastern Ukraine – indeed, throughout all of Ukraine thanks to Russia’s continuing missile attacks on Kyiv and other cities – the war goes on. In and around Bakhmut, the Ukrainian military reported further retreats of Russian forces from territory immediately to the north and south of the city, in some places by as much as a kilometer or two. And the Russian forces still have not taken all of the western portion of the city itself. Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Ganna Malyar said Russia had moved reserves into the city but they had been pushed back; “The enemy is trying to regain what they have lost...but our forces are repulsing the

attacks. It's very difficult to carry out combat missions there and every meter is like 10 kilometers in other conditions." And Oleksandr Syrskyi, the commander of Ukraine's ground forces, speaking of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin's private military company consisting of mercenaries and former convicts, which has been at the forefront of Russia's effort to take Bakhmut, said, "Wagner's troops climbed into Bakhmut like rats into a mousetrap. Using the principle of active defense, we resort to counteroffensive actions in some directions near Bakhmut. The enemy has more resources, but we are destroying his plans."

The battle for Bakhmut, which has little strategic value for Russia other than as a steppingstone to the larger and more important cities of Kramatorsk and Sloviansk 30 to 40 miles to the west, has obviously been costly for both sides. But it has been especially costly for Russia; Oleksii Reznikov, the Ukrainian defense minister, estimates that Russia has lost many more troops than Ukraine in and around Bakhmut, as many as 70,000 dead or wounded – an extraordinarily high toll to pay for a few square kilometers of a largely-destroyed small city.

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May 19, 2023