

Update on the counteroffensive: Small advances in southeast as Russian offensive continues in the east.



UK Defence Intelligence update on the battlefield situation in Ukraine as of today.

Ukraine’s counteroffensive against the Russian forces in eastern and southeastern Ukraine began in early June. Last week, in week 21 of the counteroffensive, the Ukrainian forces continued to attack the Russian forces in the area south of the largely destroyed city of Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine and continued their slow advance toward Melitopol and Berdiansk in southeastern Ukraine – an advance that, if successful, would cut Russia’s “land bridge” to Crimea. They also continued to block the Russian forces’ attempts to move toward Kupiansk in Kharkiv region in northeastern Ukraine and toward Avdiivka and Marinka just north and west of Donetsk city in eastern Ukraine. And they prepared to cross the Dnipro River in the south in an effort to retake Kherson region and regain Ukraine’s land access to Crimea.

This week the Ukrainian forces have continued their slow advance toward Melitopol while defending against the continued Russian offensive operations toward Kupiansk, the area south of Bakhmut, and Avdiivka and Marinka. In its daily reports this week through today, the Ukrainian General Staff reported that the Ukrainian forces had repelled between 5 and 10 Russian attacks each day in the direction of Kupiansk, between 5 and 10 Russian attacks each day in the area south of Bakhmut, between 15 and 20 Russian attacks each day toward Avdiivka, and between 12 and 20 Russian attacks each day toward Marinka. The General Staff also reported the Ukrainian forces had repelled Russian attacks each day on Robotyne and Verbove, both of which are 10 to 15 miles south of Orikhiv and were taken by the Ukrainian forces several weeks ago. At the same time, the General Staff reported that the Ukrainian forces continued their

offensive operations in the direction of Melitopol, although it acknowledged the operational situation “remains challenging” in both eastern and southern Ukraine.

It would be wrong to say, as some have, that the counteroffensive has stalled. It hasn't – at least not yet. Indeed, the UK Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation in Ukraine that occasionally accompanies its daily updates on the war but which, until last Friday, had remained entirely unchanged since early September identifies several significant changes in the battlefield situation over the past two months. Comparing today's map, identical to last Friday's, with those issued without any changes between early September and last Friday, reveals that over the past two months Ukraine has retaken a small area along the northern portion of the border of Luhansk and Donetsk regions between Rubizhne and Lyman, as well as a small area just north of Bakhmut, an area west of Vuhledar that's about 20 miles wide and 6 miles deep, and an area south of Orikhiv that's about 12 miles wide and 10 miles deep.

But if the counteroffensive hasn't stalled, it has progressed slowly, no doubt the result of both the continuing advantage of the Russian forces, despite the assistance provided, belatedly, by the West in advanced fighter jets, tanks, and other equipment, and Russia's willingness to accept a quite extraordinary number of casualties; in regard to the latter, earlier this week Ukraine's Ministry of Defense reported that more than 300,000 Russian troops have been killed or seriously wounded since the war began on Feb. 24, 2022. And unfortunately, time and the weather aren't on Ukraine's side – time, because judging from the recent comments of several East European leaders and some Republicans on Capitol Hill, support for continued military assistance for Ukraine is weakening among some who until now have supported such assistance; weather, because the rains that are now turning battlefields and trenches into thick mud will soon be followed by the snows of the Ukrainian winter.

On Wednesday, Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, the commander in chief of the Ukrainian forces, gave a quite extraordinary – and sobering – interview accompanying his by-invitation article in *The Economist*. In the article, he said, “the war is now moving to a new stage: what we in the military call “positional” warfare of static and attritional fighting, as in the first world war, in contrast to the “manoeuvre” warfare of movement and speed. This will benefit Russia, allowing it to rebuild its military power, eventually threatening Ukraine's armed forces and the state itself. What is the way out? Basic weapons, such as missiles and shells, remain essential. But Ukraine's armed forces need key military capabilities and technologies to break out of this kind of war. The most important one is air power. Control of the skies is essential to large-scale ground operations. At the start of the war we had 120 warplanes. Of these, only one-third were usable. Russia's air force has taken huge losses and we have destroyed over 550 of its air-defense systems, but it maintains a significant advantage over us and continues to build new attack squadrons. That advantage has made it harder for us to advance. Russia's air-defense system increasingly prevent our planes from flying.....Drones must be part of our answer. Ukraine needs to conduct massive strikes using decoy and attack drones to

overload Russia's air-defence systems.... A positional war is a prolonged one that carries enormous risk to Ukraine's armed forces and to its state. If Ukraine is to escape from that trap, we will need all these things: air superiority, much-improved electronic warfare and counter-battery capabilities, new mine-breaching technology and the ability to mobilise and train more reserves."

In the interview, Zaluzhny elaborated on some of the points in his article. He noted that the battlefield reminds him of World War I: Speaking of both sides, he said, "Just like in the first world war, we have reached the level of technology that puts us into a stalemate. There will most likely be no deep and beautiful breakthrough." The course of the counteroffensive has undermined the initial Western hopes that Ukraine would demonstrate to Russian President Putin that the war is unwinnable and persuade him to negotiate: "That was my mistake. Russia has lost at least 150,000 dead. In any other country such casualties would have stopped the war." Zaluzhny acknowledged he was surprised by the slow pace of the counteroffensive: "First I thought there was something wrong with our commanders, so I changed some of them. Then I thought maybe our soldiers are not fit for purpose, so I moved soldiers in some brigades." When that didn't work, he looked again at a book he had once read as a student on breaching fortified defense lines in World War I. He realized, he said, "that is exactly where we are because, just like then, the level of our technological development today has put both us and our enemies in a stupor.... The simple fact is that we see everything the enemy is doing and they see everything we are doing. In order for us to break this deadlock we need something new, like the gunpowder which the Chinese invented and we are still using to kill each other" – which, he suggested, would have to involve innovations in drones, electronic warfare, anti-artillery capabilities, demining equipment, and even the use of robotics.

But there is no sign of a technological breakthrough in drones or electronic warfare and so the implication is that Ukraine is stuck in a long war – one in which Russia has an advantage: "The biggest risk of an attritional trench war is that it can drag on for years and wear down the Ukrainian state." Putin, he said, is counting on a collapse in Ukrainian morale and western support. There's no question, he said, that a long war favors Russia, which has a population three times the size and an economy ten times the size of Ukraine: "Let's be honest, it's a feudal state where the cheapest resource is human life. And for us...the most expensive thing we have is our people.... We need to look for the solution, we need to find this gunpowder, quickly master it and use it for a speedy victory. Because sooner or later we are going to find that we simply don't have enough people to fight." A sobering and grim assessment of a war with no end in sight.

In an interview with Meet the Press today, President Zelenskyy, while acknowledging the slow pace of the counteroffensive, disputed the view that there is a stalemate on the battlefield: "They [the Russians] thought they would checkmate us, but this didn't happen. I don't think that this is a stalemate. Our military are coming up with different plans, with different operations in order to move forward faster and to strike the Russian

Federation unexpectedly.” He acknowledged that Ukraine’s progress in the counteroffensive has been slow, and that “there is a fatigue” as the conflict goes on. But reiterating his earlier pleas for more U.S. military assistance, he insisted the Ukrainian military is “still more motivated than any Russians who came to Ukraine to kill us.”

David R. Cameron

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