

As Ukraine's counteroffensive continues, Putin alludes to negotiations



UK Defence Intelligence update on the battlefield situation in Ukraine as of Nov. 24.

Ukraine's counteroffensive against the Russian forces holding much of eastern and southeastern Ukraine, which began in early June, continued last week in week 25. As Friday's British Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation (above) indicates, the Ukrainian forces attacked the Russian forces in the area around the largely destroyed city of Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine; the area just south of Orikhiv in southeastern Ukraine; and the area on the east bank of the Dnipro River near the city of Kherson in southern Ukraine. Meanwhile, the Russian forces continued their effort to advance toward Kupiansk in Kharkiv region in northeastern Ukraine and toward Avdiivka, a few miles north of the large Russian-held city of Donetsk in eastern Ukraine.

Yesterday evening, as week 26 of the counteroffensive began, the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine reported there had been 46 combat clashes on the front lines in the past 24 hours, as well as 33 Russian air strikes and 45 multiple launch rocket system attacks on the positions of the Ukrainian forces and populated areas. The General Staff said the operational situation in the east and the south of the country "remains difficult."

In the Kupiansk direction, the Russian forces conducted six attacks, all of which were repelled. In the Lyman direction, where until now they hadn't conducted attacks, the Russian forces conducted several unsuccessful assaults and attacked about 10 settlements with artillery and mortar fire. And in the area just south of Bakhmut, the Russian forces conducted seven attacks accompanied by airstrikes as well as artillery and mortar fire. All of the attacks were repelled.

In the area near Avdiivka, just to the north of the large city of Donetsk, the Russian forces, supported with aircraft, artillery, and mortar fire, conducted 24 attacks, all of which were repelled by the Ukrainian forces. And in the area around Mariinka, just to the west of Donetsk city, the Russian forces, supported with aircraft, artillery, and mortar fire, conducted four attacks, all of which were repelled by the Ukrainian forces.

In the area to the south of Orikhiv, the General Staff reported the Russian forces did not conduct offensive operations but did attack more than 15 settlements held by the Ukrainian forces with artillery and mortar fire. And it reported that while the Russian forces attacked the city of Kherson with artillery, the Ukrainian forces continued to hold their positions on the left, or southeastern, bank of the Dnipro River and inflict fire damage on the enemy.

In a further update this morning, the General Staff reported that over the past 24 hours the Russian forces had conducted seven attacks in the direction of Kupiansk, all of which were repelled by the Ukrainian forces. It reported the Russian forces had conducted unsuccessful attacks in the direction of Lyman as well. And it reported the Russian forces had conducted ten attacks on settlements just south of Bakhmut, all of which were repelled by Ukrainian forces that inflicted losses in manpower and equipment on the Russian forces and took back some territory.

In the area of Avdiivka, the General Staff reported the Ukrainian forces continued to hold their ground against the Russian forces which, supported by aircraft, continued to attempt to encircle that city and, toward that end, conducted 30 attacks, all of which were repelled. And in the area of Mariinka, it reported the Russian forces, supported by aircraft, conducted seven attacks on the Ukrainian forces, all of which were repelled.

The General Staff also reported that in southeastern Ukraine, the Russian forces conducted unsuccessful assaults west of Verbove, a small settlement about 12 miles southeast of Orikhiv. It also reported that in the Kherson area, the Ukrainian forces continued to hold their positions on the east bank of the Dnipro River and conducted counter-battery fire and attacked the Russian forces behind their lines.

Last Wednesday, speaking at the G20 virtual summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin surprised many when he alluded briefly to the possibility of negotiations that might end the war, saying, “Some of our colleagues here have mentioned that they are shocked by ‘Russia’s ongoing aggression in Ukraine’. Indeed, military operations are always a tragedy for specific people, specific families, and the country as a whole. And we must certainly think about how to stop this tragedy. Russia has never refused to negotiate peace with Ukraine. It is not Russia but Ukraine that has publicly announced that it is withdrawing from the negotiation process. Moreover, the country’s leader signed an executive order prohibiting such negotiations with Russia. I understand that this war and the loss of life are shocking and could not be otherwise.”

The loss of life is indeed shocking, on both sides. Today the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense reported that, as of today, the “combat losses” of the Russian forces between

February 24, 2022, when Putin's "special military operation" began, and this morning total 325,580. In the more than 15 months between Feb. 24, 2022 and June 4, 2023, the Russian "combat losses" totaled 209,940, which means that in the nearly six months since Ukraine's counteroffensive began the Russian forces have lost another 115,640. (These figures, it should be noted, are Ukrainian estimates; Russia doesn't announce the number of Russian troops killed or seriously wounded.)

Russian voters will go to the polls in the presidential election on March 17, 2024 and will undoubtedly re-elect Putin to another six-year term by a very substantial margin. He obviously isn't worried about being reelected. But he does look at polls and perhaps he was thinking of a recent Levada poll when he alluded to negotiations at the G20 summit. (Levada is an independent, non-governmental polling and research organization.) In a poll conducted in late October, Russians were asked, "Do you think it is necessary to continue military actions or proceed to negotiations?" 56 percent said they preferred starting negotiations while 37 percent said they preferred continuing military actions. Not surprisingly, 69 percent of those 18 to 24 and 64 percent of those 25 to 39 preferred starting negotiations. Also not surprisingly, 58 percent of the women preferred starting negotiations. Putin knows he'll win on March 17 by a very substantial margin. But he does read the polls and he is aware that opposition to the war is increasing in Russia.

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