

## The war in Ukraine continues with no end in sight



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

Ukraine's counteroffensive against the Russian forces holding much of eastern and southeastern Ukraine continued last week in the 33rd week since it began in early June last year. But the counteroffensive continues to be, as it has been for the last several weeks, literally that - a counter-offensive, a defensive operation against the continuing offensive operations of the Russian forces at a number of points along the 1200-kilometer "contact line" between the forces in eastern and southeastern Ukraine. The latest British Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation (above) indicates, as it has since mid-December, that the Russian forces continue to attack in the direction of Kupiansk in Kharkiv region in northeastern Ukraine, toward the area around the largely destroyed city of Bakhmut, and toward the small city of Avdiivka about ten miles north of the large city of Donetsk. And while the map indicates the Ukrainians have retaken a small segment of territory just south of Orikhiv, that territory was taken months ago and the Ukrainian forces have made very little progress since then in moving southward toward Melitopol and Berdiansk – a movement that, if successful, would enable the Ukrainian forces to cut Russia's "land corridor" from the territory it holds in eastern Ukraine to the annexed territory of Crimea.

The extent to which the Ukrainian counteroffensive has become a defensive operation against the continuing Russian offensive operations is perhaps best illustrated in the updates issued each morning by the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces on the combat engagements the previous day. The General Staff reported that in the week from January 7 through January 13 there were a total of 422 Russian attacks at various points along the contact line – 35 in the direction of Kupiansk; 33 in the direction of Lyman;

17 in the direction of the area around Bakhmut; 155 toward Avdiivka; 102 toward Marinka, a small city about fifteen miles west of Donetsk city; 28 toward several villages and small towns south of Orikhiv; and 52 in Kherson region east of the Dnipro River in southeastern Ukraine. According to the General Staff, all of the attacks were repelled. The General Staff reported that last week, from January 14 through January 20, there were a total of 622 attacks at those points along the contact line – 62 in the direction of Kupiansk, 138 in the direction of Lyman, 43 in the direction of the area around Bakhmut, 224 toward Avdiivka, 88 toward Marinka, 26 toward several small towns south of Orikhiv, and 41 in Kherson region east of the Dnipro. As in the previous week, the General Staff reported that all of the attacks were repelled.

The number of attacks launched by the Russian forces against those cities and areas may not of course be the best indicator of Russia's priorities in the continuing battle in eastern Ukraine. But it is the best indicator available to the public. And by that indicator, certainly the highest priority in Russia's continuing offensive operations in eastern Ukraine the last two weeks has been taking Avdiivka, toward which it launched 379 attacks in the last two weeks, followed by Marinka, toward which it launched 190 attacks in the last two weeks. Both are important because they are, respectively, on the northern and western outskirts of the metropolitan area around Donetsk city, the capital of the region and by far the largest city in the region. In a meeting on December 25, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu informed President Putin that "Today, as a result of active offensive actions, the assault teams of the South group of forces completely liberated the town of Marinka located five kilometers southwest of Donetsk... Importantly, we have significantly pushed the artillery further back to the west from Donetsk. This allows us to protect Donetsk from attacks more effectively." Evidently, Shoigu exaggerated what the Russian forces had accomplished; nearly a month later, they are still trying to take Marinka. Avdiivka is important for the same reason, located as it is only a few miles to the north of Donetsk city. As long as Ukraine holds both, Russia's hold over the capital city of the region is threatened.

While one must be cautious about reading too much into these numbers, it does appear that the frequency of Russian attacks at various points along the contact line may reflect its priorities in its continuing offensive. From that perspective, it's especially interesting that last week the Russian forces launched 138 attacks in the direction of Lyman compared with only 33 the week before. Lyman is a small city, with a pre-war population of little more than 20,000. But it would provide Russia with a steppingstone toward the large industrial cities of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, both of which are only a few miles south of Lyman.

There has been much talk recently about how and when and under what circumstances the war might end – either with a formal ceasefire or, failing that, a simple cessation of the fighting, a freezing of the conflict (an appropriate term given the weather in eastern Ukraine). Indeed, on several occasions over the last several months, even Putin has reportedly expressed some interest in moving toward a ceasefire. But his comments

were undoubtedly designed to cause the West to hesitate in supplying Ukraine with the additional military equipment it needs in order to win the war, and in light of the foot-dragging in the U.S. Congress and in some other Western governments, they've evidently had the desired effect.

Nevertheless, at some point both Russia and Ukraine and its supporters will consider the possibility of a ceasefire and peace talks. After all, in the first few months after the war began, there were several meetings of Russian and Ukrainian representatives in Belarus and Istanbul at which possible terms for a ceasefire and peace treaty were discussed. But those talks stalled as the war continued and ended after Russia formally annexed Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions in early October 2022. Later that month, President Zelenskyy announced a 10-point Peace Formula which made it clear in point 6 that "to cease the hostilities, Russia must withdraw all its troops and armed formations from the territory of Ukraine, plain and simple. Ukraine's full control over its state border, recognized internationally, needs to be restored. Without this, no long-lasting peace can be achieved." Russia, having just annexed those four regions, in addition to Crimea in 2014, unambiguously rejects point 6 and, indeed, all of Zelenskyy's Peace Formula. As a result, both sides appear to be resigned to a long and immensely costly war. At Davos last week, there were discussions among a number of national security advisers concerning Zelenskyy's Peace Formula and a possible end to the conflict. But one thing seems clear: Before it agrees to a ceasefire and, possibly, to subsequent peace talks, Russia intends to take and hold more, and perhaps all, of the territory in eastern Ukraine it now regards as part of Russia and doesn't control – which of course means neither Russia nor Ukraine will agree to a ceasefire and peace talks. And so the war goes on, with no end in sight.

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January 22, 2024