

As Ukraine changes its military leadership the Russian offensive continues in the east



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

Last week, much of the news coverage of the war in Ukraine focused on the change in the top leadership of the Ukrainian military. As expected, on Thursday President Zelenskyy replaced Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine with Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, since 2019 the commander of the Ukrainian Ground Forces. Syrskyi is perhaps best known for having organized and led the defense of Kyiv after President Putin launched Russia’s “special military operation” on Feb. 24, 2022. He is also known, and highly regarded, for having directed the subsequent recapture later in 2022 of much of Kharkiv region in northeastern Ukraine, adjacent to the regions of Luhansk and Donetsk that comprise the Donbas. But he is also known for having directed the lengthy defense of the small city of Bakhmut in Donetsk region last winter and spring – a defense that was ultimately unsuccessful and resulted in a substantial number of Ukrainian casualties.

Zelenskyy subsequently appointed Lt. Gen. Oleksandr Pavliuk, the First Deputy Minister of Defense, to succeed Syrskyi as commander of the Ukrainian Ground Forces. Prior to his appointment as First Deputy Minister in February 2023, Pavliuk served as commander of the Joint Forces Operation from July 2021 to March 2022 that prepared for an anticipated, and on Feb. 24, 2022 actual, large-scale Russian invasion. He served from March to May 2022 as head of the Kyiv Regional Military Administration and then, from May 2022 until February 2023, as Chief of Staff and deputy commander of

the Ground Forces. Zelenskyy also appointed Maj. Gen. Anatoliy Barhylevych as Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces.

While much of the news last week focused on the change in the leadership of Ukraine's military, the war in eastern Ukraine continued to be, as it has been in recent weeks, a battle between Russian forces conducting offensive operations at a number of points along the 1200-kilometer "contact line" between the forces and Ukrainian forces conducting defensive operations against the Russian attacks. The latest British Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation as of last Friday (above) indicates, as it has for some time, that the Russian forces continued 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 Avdiivka, a small city about ten miles north of Donetsk city. But the Russian forces continued to attack at other points along the "contact line" as well – most notably, toward Lyman in northern Donetsk region, which if taken would provide a steppingstone toward the large industrial cities of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk; toward Marinka, a small city about ten miles to the west of Donetsk; toward the area controlled by the Ukrainian forces south of Orikhiv; and toward the area in Kherson region in southern Ukraine where the Ukrainian forces have established a beachhead on the east bank of the Dnipro River.

The General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces provides detailed updates each morning on the previous day's combat engagements, and combining the figures reported on the number of Russian attacks each day at each point provides some information on the location and intensity of the Russian attacks and Ukrainian counterattacks. Thus, last week, from Sunday, Feb. 4, through Saturday, Feb. 10, the General Staff reported a total of 622 Russian attacks – 27 in the direction of Kupiansk, 77 in the direction of Lyman, 73 in the direction of the area around Bakhmut, 250 toward Avdiivka, 152 toward Marinka, 5 toward Shakhtarsk, another small city near Donetsk city, 18 toward several villages and small towns south of Orikhiv, and 20 toward the Ukraine forces just east of Kherson city in southern Ukraine. As it does every week, the General Staff reported that all of the attacks were repelled.

Over the previous four weeks, the General Staff reported a total of 431 Russian attacks in the week of Jan. 7-13; 628 in the week of Jan. 14-20; 455 in the week of Jan. 21-27; and 453 in the week of Jan. 28-Feb. 3. Last week, as in each of the previous four weeks, Avdiivka was the focus of the most attacks. Judging simply from the numbers of attacks, Avdiivka, just a few miles north of Donetsk city, the site of a large coke plant and a hub for several important roads and rail lines, has been the primary target of the Russian forces in the Donbas. But Marinka, also just a few miles from Donetsk city, and Lyman, the steppingstone to Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, are also high-priority targets for the Russian forces.

It is of course not at all surprising that, as the war approaches the start of its third year on Feb. 24, the Russian forces have concentrated their offensive operations on Avdiivka and Marinka, both of which are near Donetsk city, as well as Lyman and the area around

Bakhmut. Nearly two years ago, less than a month after the “special military operation” began, Col. Gen. Sergey Rudskoy, the first deputy chief of Russia’s General Staff of the Armed Forces and head of its Main Operational Directorate, gave a briefing on the “operation” in which he said, “In general, the main objectives of the first stage of the operation have been accomplished. The combat potential of the armed forces of Ukraine has been considerably reduced, which...makes it possible to focus our core efforts on achieving the main goal, the liberation of Donbass.”

And in a speech on Sept. 21, 2022 supporting the proposal of the Defense Ministry and General Staff for a partial mobilization that would call up military reservists, Putin likewise described the purpose of the “special military operation” as the “liberation” of the Donbas: "After today’s Kiev regime publicly rejected peaceful solution of the Donbass problem and, moreover, announced its claim to nuclear weapons, it became absolutely clear that another large-scale offensive against Donbass was inevitable. And later another offensive against Russia’s Crimea, against Russia would inevitably follow as well. In this respect the decision to start a preemptive military operation was necessary and the only option. The main goal of this operation, which is to liberate the whole of Donbass, remains unaltered.... The Luhansk People’s Republic has been liberated from the neo-Nazis almost completely. Fighting in the Donetsk People’s Republic continues.”

There can be little doubt that the primary objective of the Russian forces at this point in the war is what it has been since the outset – to take the two regions, Donetsk and Luhansk, which constitute the Donbas. Whether they will succeed remains to be seen.

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