As war enters year three, Russian offensive continues in the east

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

Last week, as Russia’s war against Ukraine entered its third year, the Russian forces continued their offensive operations at a number of points along the “contact line” between the forces in eastern and southeastern Ukraine. As Friday’s British Defense Intelligence map of the battlefield situation, above, indicates, 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, toward the area around Avdiivka, a small city about ten miles north of Donetsk city from which the Ukrainians withdrew on Feb. 17, and toward the area south of Orikhiv in which the Ukrainian forces had previously taken several small towns and villages. But, as in recent weeks, the Russian forces continued to attack at other points along the “contact line” as well – most notably, toward Lyman in northern Donetsk region near the industrial cities of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk; in the area to the west and south of Marinka, a small city about ten miles west of Donetsk city; and toward the area in Kherson region in southern Ukraine in which the Ukrainian forces have established a beachhead on the east bank of the Dnipro River.

Based on the daily updates on the previous day’s combat engagements issued each morning by the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, last week, from Sunday through Saturday, the Russian forces conducted more than 600 attacks against the Ukrainian forces defending those points along the contact line – a total of 49 in the direction of Kupiansk, 68 in the direction of Lyman, 62 in the direction of the area around Bakhmut, 157 toward the area around Avdiivka, 228 toward the area to the west and south of Marinka, 27 toward several villages and
small towns taken by the Ukrainian forces south of Orikhiv, and 17 toward the
Ukrainian forces just east of Kherson city in southern Ukraine. The fact that the
most frequently-attacked areas, by far, were those held by Ukrainian forces in the
area around Avdiivka and to the west and south of Marinka, reinforces the view
already evident from the frequency of the Russian attacks against the Ukrainian
forces in both areas in recent weeks, that the immediate and most pressing priority
for the Russians in eastern Ukraine is to secure the area around Donetsk city, after
which they will presumably attempt to continue pushing back the Ukrainian forces
and taking most if not all of the territory in Donetsk region they don’t already
hold.

On Saturday, Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, the Commander-in-Chief of the
Ukrainian Armed Forces, made some surprisingly candid comments on Telegram,
subsequently quoted in the Kyiv Independent and Kyiv Post (and also, it should be
said, in TASS) regarding his experience since taking over as Commander-in-Chief
from Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi on Feb. 6: “I continue to work on the eastern front.
Within three days, it became completely clear why…some brigades manage to
hold back enemy attacks and maintain their positions, while others do not. First of
all, it depends on the brigade’s commander, his training, experience, and his
ability to make adequate and balanced decisions…. In some cases, when the
commander does not control the situation, and their actions and commands
directly threaten the lives and health of their subordinates, I am forced to make
personnel decisions.” He said he had sent specialists to brigades facing problems
to assist and provide expertise and that, based on reports from commanders, he
had made whatever decisions were necessary regarding reserves and supplies of
ammunition, drones, and other equipment.

But Syrskyi also highlighted the performance of several units, including the 54th
Mechanized Brigade, which eliminated two columns of Russian armored vehicles
with artillery and mines; the 25th Airborne Brigade and 47th Mechanized Brigade
for having driven back the Russian forces at Orlivka and Berdychi; and the 79th
Air Assault Brigade, which did the same in the area near Novomykhailivka. He
also said he had moved an unnamed brigade that had been fighting for two years
to the back to restore its combat capability. And he noted that a week after his
appointment as commander-in-chief, he had withdrawn the Ukrainian forces from
Avdiivka, where they had been facing many weeks of Russian attacks “in order to
avoid encirclement and preserve the lives and health of servicemen.”

In a video address soon thereafter, President Zelenskyy made it clear that he
supports what Syrskyi said: “The commander-in-chief has a carte blanche to make
personnel changes in the army, in any of the headquarters, anywhere. All
Ukrainian commanders have to know the front, to feel the front and its real needs,
to really be close to the soldiers and the officers, and to be exactly the right people
for achieving Ukraine’s goals. Early next week, after Colonel General Syrskyi
returns from the front, I expect to hear a detailed report from him, as well as
proposals on further changes we should make and how we should act in the future."

David R. Cameron
March 4, 2024