

5/24/24

## As Russian attacks continue, Putin names a new defense minister



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

Last week, the Russian forces continued their attacks against the Ukrainian forces 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 continued to attack in the direction of Kupiansk in Kharkiv region, in the area west of the destroyed city of Bakhmut from which the Ukrainian forces withdrew after a prolonged siege last spring, in the area west of Avdiivka, a small city north of Donetsk city from which the Ukrainian forces withdrew in February, and toward the area south of Orikhiv in Zaporizhzhia region taken by Ukrainian forces last year.

But the Ukrainian General Staff reported that the Russian forces also attacked at a number of other points along the contact line last week in addition to the points identified on the British map above – specifically, toward Lyman in northern Donetsk region which, if taken, would provide a pathway southward to the nearby cities of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk; toward the area to the west and south of Marinka, a small city west of Donetsk city the Russians took in December; and toward the area in Kherson region in southern Ukraine where the Ukrainian forces established a beachhead on the east bank of the Dnipro River. The General Staff also reported that on Friday and Saturday, Russian forces attacked a number of small villages northeast of the city of Kharkiv and close to the border with Russia.

Regarding the latter attacks, British Defence Intelligence reported today that “Russia’s newly-formed Northern Grouping of Forces have attacked into Ukraine’s Kharkiv region and taken control of several villages. The border town of Vovchansk is almost certainly an immediate Russian objective and is currently

contested between Russian and Ukrainian forces. By opening up an additional axis of attack, Russia is almost certainly attempting to divert Ukrainian resources away from other parts of the front line and to threaten Kharkiv, the second largest city in Ukraine.” But, it noted, “It is unlikely that Russia has built up sufficient combat power to take the city without diverting additional forces into the area.”

Based on the daily reports of the General Staff of the Armed Services of Ukraine, last week the Russian forces conducted a total of 696 attacks against the Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine – 80 in the direction of Kupiansk compared with 68 the previous week, 49 in the direction of Lyman compared with 97 the week before, 123 in the area west of Bakhmut, compared with 176 the week before, 167 toward the area west of Avdiivka and northwest of Donetsk city compared with 255 the week before, 65 in the area south of Marinka and southwest of Donetsk city compared with 122 the week before, 70 toward several villages and small towns south of Orikhiv held by the Ukrainian forces compared with 30 the week before, and 17 against the Ukrainian forces on the east bank of the Dnipro River compared with 48 the week before.

In addition, the General Staff also reported a number of Russian attacks at other points last week – 21 toward the several small villages northeast of Kharkiv, 3 in the area southwest of Marinka and Donetsk, 16 west of Sievierodonetsk toward Sloviansk, 27 in the area west of Bakhmut including the small city of Chasiv Yar, 32 toward the area west and northwest of Avdiivka, 10 southwest of Bakhmut, and 16 southwest of Donetsk. The total number of Russian attacks against the Ukrainian forces at all of the locations last week, 696, was 100 less than the total number of attacks the week before but was nevertheless greater than the number of attacks throughout the month of April – 392 in the week of March 31-April 6, 513 in the week of April 7-13, 580 in the week of April 14-20, and 639 in the week of April 21-27.

The fact that Russia launched roughly 100 attacks a day against the Ukrainian forces in eastern and southeastern Ukraine last week, and the fact that most of them were directed toward Lyman, Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, and other cities in Donetsk region underscored yet again the fact that, notwithstanding the foray into the area north of Kharkiv, which may have been motivated at least in part by a desire to divert some of the Ukrainian forces from defending their positions in eastern Ukraine, the priority for the Russian forces at this point in the war clearly remains taking most, if not all, of Donetsk region – in particular, the industrial heartland of the region extending from Lyman in the north through Sloviansk and Kramatorsk to Vuhledar in the south – while continuing to hold the broad “land bridge” to Crimea it holds in southeastern Ukraine.

In comments Saturday, Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, said that, while the Ukrainian forces have thus far prevented the Russian forces from breaking through their lines, there has been a “significant intensification of the enemy’s offensive” since the Russian

presidential election in March and the situation has “deteriorated significantly in recent days.” He also said the situation around the city of Chasiv Yar is “difficult and tense” with the area under constant fire, and the situation in the Kupiansk and Lyman directions is “changing rapidly.” He said, “The enemy is actively attacking our positions in the Lyman and Bakhmut sectors with assault groups supported by armored vehicles. In the Pokrovsk sector [20-25 miles northwest of Donetsk and Avdiivka], they are trying to break through our defense using dozens of tanks and armored personnel carriers.” And he described the situation in Kharkiv region as “difficult” after the Russians intensified their offensive operations over the weekend. But he said the Ukrainian troops “are doing everything to hold their defensive lines and positions.”

While the war in Ukraine continued in eastern Ukraine, attention last week was focused also on a series of high-profile events in Moscow. On Tuesday, Putin was inaugurated for another six-year term as President and the government resigned. On Thursday, he presided, as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, over the military parade in Red Square marking the 79<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory in World War II (known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45). On Friday, the Duma approved Mikhail Mishustin, the incumbent, as Prime Minister and Putin reappointed him. And on Sunday, the Kremlin announced that Nikolay Patrushev had been “relieved of duties in connection with being appointed to a different post,” that Putin had appointed Gen. Sergei Shoigu, until last Tuesday the Defense Minister, as Secretary of Russia’s Security Council, and that he had nominated Andrey Belousov, the former First Deputy Prime Minister, to be the new Defense Minister replacing Shoigu. Belousov is an economist and had served as the First Deputy Prime Minister since January 2020 and, prior to that, as Minister of Economic Development from May 2012 to June 2013, and then as an economic assistant to Putin from June 2013 until his appointment as First Deputy Prime Minister in 2020. Belousov has no military experience but is regarded as an excellent administrator.

Today Patrushev was named a presidential aide. The Kremlin spokesman said he “will deal with issues related to shipbuilding. This is a huge and quite complex industry. Thus, Nikolay Platonovich’s vast experience will definitely play a big role.” But Patrushev and Putin have been close since their days in the KGB in Leningrad. They served together as deputy chiefs of staff on President Yeltsin’s staff in 1997-98, Patrushev was appointed deputy director of the FSB (Federal Security Service) in 1998 soon after Putin was appointed director, he succeeded Putin as director when Putin became Prime Minister in 1999, and he became Secretary of the Security Council in 2008 when Putin became Prime Minister under President Medvedev in 2008. His new position probably has less to do with shipbuilding than with serving as a presidential adviser.

There was some speculation beforehand that in his speeches last week Putin might refer to the war, and even to specific battles in it. As it turned out, he spoke only in very general terms about the war. But interestingly, he did speak of the possibility

of talks with other countries about the war. In his inaugural address, he said, “I humbly honour our heroes, the participants in the special military operation [his name for the war against Ukraine], and all those who are fighting for our Fatherland. I would like to thank you again for the trust you have placed in me and for your unwavering support.... You, the citizens of Russia, have confirmed that the country is on the right course. This is of significant importance right now, as we face serious challenges. I see this as your deep awareness of our common historical goals, and unwavering resolve to defend our choices, our values, our freedom and Russia’s national interest. I am confident that we will pass through this difficult pivotal period with dignity and emerge even stronger.” Continuing, he said, “We have been and will continue to be open to strengthening good relations with all countries that view Russia as a reliable and honest partner.... We are not rejecting dialogue with Western states. The choice is theirs: whether they intend to continue trying to contain Russia’s development, continue the policy of aggression, the relentless pressure they have been exerting on our country for years, or seek a path to cooperation and peace. To reiterate, we are open to talks, including on security and strategic stability, but not to negotiations from a position of strength. We are open to a conversation without arrogance, conceit or exceptionalism – a dialogue on an equal footing and with respect for each other’s interest.”

In his speech at the military parade on May 9, Putin said, “Today we are honoring our fathers and grandfathers and grand grandfathers. They defended their native land and crushed Nazism, liberated the peoples of Europe and displayed unparalleled heroism in combat and on the home front.... Russia is now going through a difficult, watershed moment of its history. We are celebrating Victory Day against the backdrop of the Special Military Operation. All of those engaged in it, on the frontlines, are our heroes. We are humbled by your fortitude and self-sacrifice. All of Russia stands with you. Our veterans, too, believe in you, and they are worried about you.”

They should be worried. Ukraine estimates that as of May 9, Russia had experienced 478,730 combat losses – that is, soldiers either killed or removed from action because of wounds. And there will no doubt be many more before the war ends.

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May 14, 2024