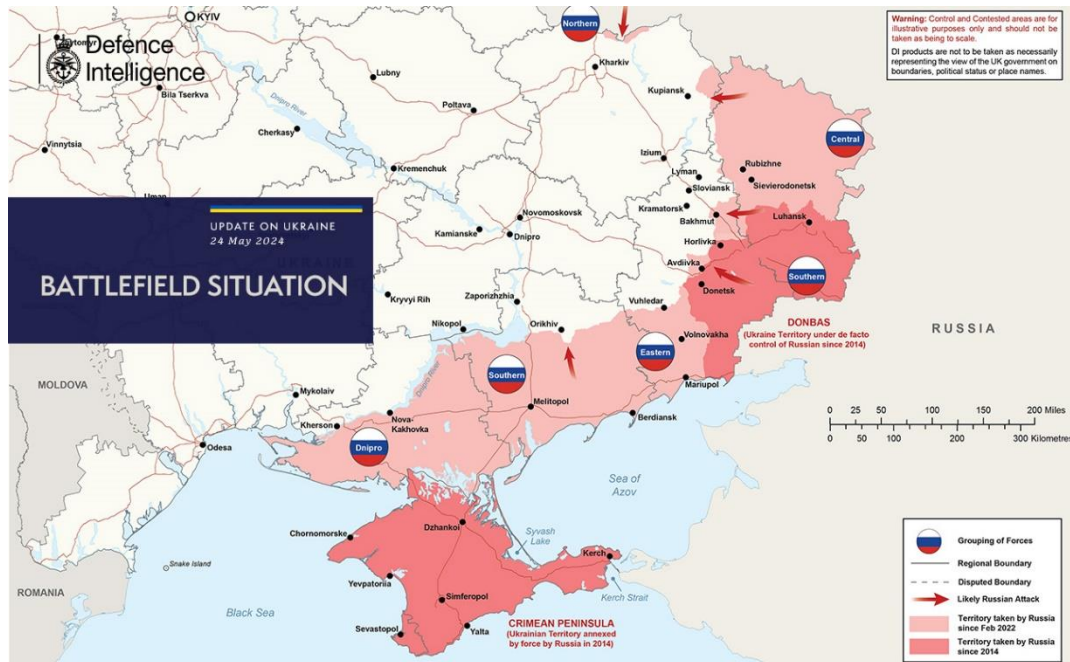


As Russian offensive continues, Putin raises possibility of talks



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

As yesterday's British Defense Intelligence map of the battlefield situation in eastern Ukraine indicates, the Russian forces continue to attack in the direction of Kupiansk in the eastern portion of 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 to the west and northwest 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. The map also indicates, for the first time since the weekly maps have been issued, that Russian forces are attacking toward the large city of Kharkiv and have taken a small slice of Ukrainian territory just inside the border north of Kharkiv. Also, and importantly given Russia's primary objective of taking the Donbas area, the map above, when compared with the previous map issued two weeks ago, indicates the Russian forces have advanced to the north and west of Avdiivka in the direction of Pokrovsk, a city which had a pre-war population of about 60,000 and is located 30 miles northwest of Donetsk city and 30 miles west of Horlivka.

In its daily updates, the Ukrainian General Staff has reported that the Russian forces are also attacking at a number of other points along the contact line between the forces in addition to those indicated on the map – specifically, toward Lyman in northern Donetsk region which, if taken, would provide a pathway southward to the large cities of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk; toward the area to the west and southwest of Donetsk city, 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.

On Thursday, Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, commenting on the Russian attack toward Kharkiv, said, “After the first minor successes during the offensive battles in Kharkiv Oblast, the enemy was completely stuck in the street battles for Vovchansk and suffered very high losses in personnel of its assault units. Currently, the enemy is transferring reserves from various fronts, trying to support active assault operations, but to no avail.” He added that fighting near the cities of Chasiv Yar, a few miles west of Bakhmut, Pokrovsk, and Kurakhove, about 12 miles west of Donetsk, was “the most intense and fierce.” He said, “The situation is difficult in the area of Kyslivka [a village about 10 miles southeast of Kupiansk], where the enemy is trying to break through our defense and reach the Oskil River.” He also described the fighting in the Pokrovsk and Kurakhove sectors as “the most intense and fierce.” And he said intense fighting is also taking place near the town of Chasiv Yar, about 12 miles west of Bakhmut, which the Russian forces are trying to “cling to at any cost.”

As the war continued, there was an intriguing report yesterday by Reuters, based on interviews with four Russian sources who claimed to be familiar with discussions in the Kremlin, that President Putin is prepared to negotiate a ceasefire to the conflict on the basis of the current alignment of forces in Ukraine and is frustrated by Western opposition to such talks and Ukrainian President Zelenskyy’s refusal to talk with the Russians. One of the sources said, “Putin can fight for as long as it takes, but Putin is also ready for a ceasefire – to freeze the war.” Asked about the report yesterday at a news conference in Belarus, Putin said the peace talks, which had taken place very briefly in the spring of 2022, should resume: “Let them resume,” he said, adding that they should be based on “the realities on the ground” and “not on the basis of what one side wants.”

Putin’s reported comments are intriguing in light of the Peace Summit that will take place in Switzerland on June 15-16. In April, following discussions with Zelenskyy, the Swiss government announced that it will host a Peace Summit at the Bürgenstock resort near Lucerne on June 15-16 and has invited more than 100 governments to participate. The basis for the discussions is a plan put forward by Zelenskyy and Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis based on the 10-point peace plan Zelenskyy announced to the leaders of the G7 in October 2022. More than 50 governments have agreed to participate in the Peace Summit and more are expected to do so in the next week or two. But Zelenskyy has made it clear that he won’t meet with Putin and that Russia will not be invited unless and until it adheres to all the terms of his 10-point peace plan, including, in particular, point 6 of the plan: “Withdrawal of Russian troops and cessation of hostilities: 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 for its part says that without its participation the Summit is pointless.

After Putin's comment in Belarus yesterday, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba wrote on X, "Putin is desperately trying to derail the Peace Summit in Switzerland on June 15-16. He is scared of its success. His entourage sends these phony signals of alleged readiness for a ceasefire despite the fact that Russian troops continue to brutally attack Ukraine while their missiles and drones rain down on Ukrainian cities and communities." The participants at the Summit are expected to formulate a common negotiating position on the outcome of the war and submit it to Russia. "Only the principled and united voice of the global majority can force him to choose peace over war," Kuleba said. "This is what the peace summit is intended to achieve. This is why he is so afraid of it."

Three of the sources told Reuters Putin had expressed his frustration about what he regards as Western efforts to prevent negotiations as well as Ukrainian President Zelenskyy's decision to rule out talks with Russia. Swiss Foreign Minister Cassis said, "The first country that we spoke with, after Ukraine of course, was Russia, because a peace process cannot happen without Russia, even if it won't be there for the first meeting." Continuing, he said, "It has to be clear from the start that Russia – sooner or later – has to be there. Now, it's not mandatory that it's there the first day. We could also imagine that on the first day, people might agree about how to better invite in Russia."

In the meantime, while the governments discuss who will attend the Peace Summit and what, if anything, will be agreed upon at the Peace Summit, the war goes on.

David R. Cameron
May 25, 2024