

THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR IN THE LIGHT OF UKRAINE'S COUNTEROFFENSIVE

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It has been already more than one and a half years since Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, Russia has several times changed the goals of its so-called Special Military Operation in Ukraine since 24 February 2022. The course of the invasion is quite dynamic just like the usual nature of war. In the initial months of the war, Russian forces had to change tactics following their failure to achieve their original objectives such as to install a puppet regime in Kyiv, if not to liquidate Ukraine as a sovereign country.

In addition to the unexpected resistance of Ukrainian forces, Russian forces were unable to achieve their initial objectives mainly because they found themselves fighting on the fronts spanning more than 2,000 km in the north, east, and south. As a result, Russians, who were forced to withdraw their forces from the northern front, shifted the war's center of gravity to the eastern front. Despite setting their sights on capturing the Ukrainian-controlled portions of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts by advancing from the northern city of Izyum and besieging Ukraine's most powerful units in Donbas, the Russian forces were unable to succeed in their mission. By April 2022, the Russian forces had trouble moving southward from Izyum, which they were able to take control of. Forced to change tactics once again, the Russians set

Siverodonetsk, the central city of the Luhansk province under Ukrainian control, as their new target. As a result of the fierce fighting and heavy shelling, the Russians took control of the city towards the end of June and immediately launched an attack on Lysychansk. As the fighting over Lysychansk intensified, the Ukrainian forces were compelled to retreat further west to the city of Siversk to avoid being besieged. Lysychansk's loss resulted in Russia capturing the entire Luhansk region. After seizing Luhansk, Russian forces launched an attack on the Ukrainian-controlled part of Donetsk, another province that makes up Donbas. However, Ukrainian forces' attempts to liberate the southern city of Kherson from Russian occupation slowed Russian attacks in Donetsk. As of July 2022, Ukraine has largely been successful in halting Russia's advance along the frontline. Russia only managed to capture Bakhmut, a small town in the east of Donetsk oblast from August 2022 to May 2023. In response, Ukraine began to prepare for a counterattack by hitting several Russian ammunition depots along the front line, mainly thanks to high-mobility artillery rocket systems (HIMARS). The primary goal of this research is to shed light on Kharkiv, Kherson, and the ongoing counteroffensive operations of Ukrainian forces. Subsequently, it aims to provide shifting Russian objectives of its so-called Special Military Operation. It is



followed by a closer look at the West's changing position towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Finally, the work provides some concluding remarks about the course of the war.

Ukraine's Counteroffensives

Ukraine's counteroffensive operations can be divided into two major phases. The first phase includes counteroffensive operations that caught Russian decision-makers off guard. Because Russia was still waging its offensive operation while the Ukrainian counteroffensive was underway, these came as a surprise to the Russian army. The first phase of Ukraine's counteroffensives included the Battle of Kyiv, the Battle of Kharkiv, and the Battle of Kherson. Russia's primary goal was undoubtedly to capture Kyiv. However, Ukrainian forces defeated Russian forces in this vital battle for Kyiv, forcing them to withdraw from the northern front. The counterattack for Kyiv began on 16 March 2022, when the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine announced the operation.¹ As a result of successful Ukrainian counterattacks, the Russians had to withdraw from the Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy oblasts on 29 March.²

After failing to take Kyiv, Russia turned its attention to Kharkiv, the second-largest city in Ukraine. The Ukrainian forces, who managed to halt the Russian

attacks, launched their counter-attack and by May 2022, Ukrainian forces succeeded in pushing the Russians as far as the Ukrainian-Russian border in Kharkiv.³ By September 2022, Ukrainian forces launched another counterattack and took back the strategically important cities of Balaklia, Kupyansk, and Izyum, located east of Kharkiv.⁴ After two months of the Kharkiv offensive, Ukrainian forces achieved a stunning victory in Kherson by compelling Russian forces to withdraw from the city.⁵ The liberation of Kherson has special significance because it came after Russia carried out a fake referendum and announced the annexation of the city. The Russians were unprepared to defend the territories they occupied since Ukraine's counter-offensive operations were not expected at this stage. The liberation of the northern oblasts (Kyiv, Sumi, and Chernihiv), Kharkiv, and Kherson was therefore rapid and relatively straightforward.

The second phase of Ukraine's counteroffensive was launched in June 2023, and as of September 2023, it is currently underway. The front line between Ukrainian and Russian forces in eastern Ukraine has not been shifting remarkably since the end of the 2022 Kharkiv and Kherson counteroffensive, with both sides making small gains losing some over the seven months preceding the 2023 Ukrainian counteroffensive. Ukraine needed time to acquire military equipment from the West and prepare its troops for the spring counterattack. Contrary to popular belief, the counteroffensive was not launched

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in the spring. Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the president of Ukraine, explained that Western military training for Ukrainian troops had not yet been completed and that Western supplies not yet been delivered in sufficient quantities to Ukraine.⁶ Although the Ukrainian Defense Minister shared a video claiming that “there will be no announcement about the beginning”⁷ it is generally accepted that the Ukrainian Armed Forces launched the offensive on June 4, 2023.

The second phase of the Ukrainian counteroffensive began primarily in two directions; the Zaporizhian and Donetsk fronts. Ukrainian forces have pursued two main lines of attack in Zaporizhzhia’s southern region: one in the region’s western parts, aimed at the strategically important Russian-occupied city of Melitopol, and the other in the eastern parts of the region, aimed at Berdiansk city on the coast of the Azov Sea. Counterattacks were launched around the city of Orikhiv in the Zaporizhzhia Oblast, where Russian forces had built the Mala Tokmachka-Polohy defensive line. The attacks concentrated on the defensive line separating the frontline villages of Robotyne and Verbove.⁸ On 28 August, Ukraine announced that it liberated Robotyne, a village in the direction of Melitopol (Zaporizhzhia)⁹ and its troops started attacking Russian positions close to Verbove, a village 15 kilometers to the east of Robotyne. Ukrainian forces have also been moving southward from the town of Velyka Novosilka in the direction of Berdyansk, where the Donetsk region meets Zaporizhzhia. As of September 1, Ukrainian troops had recaptured two villages, Staromaiorske and Urozhaine, located approximately 8 km from the Ukrainian starting positions.

Ukrainian forces launched an offensive against Russian positions on Bakhmut’s southern and northern flanks in the Donetsk direction, with some gains next to Klishchiivka and Kurdiumivka south of Bakhmut.¹⁰ The Ukrainian forces on the Donetsk front were attempting to flank the Russian units, and mercenaries camped out in the ruins of Bakhmut, which they took in May at a great human cost and which represents their only noteworthy victory since last summer. The Ukrainians are relying on the likelihood that Russian forces in Bakhmut will not be permitted to cede it in a tactical withdrawal

due to its symbolic importance to Moscow; therefore, pressing on the front has an impact by fixing a significant amount of enemy troops firmly in place thus preventing them from bolstering emerging vulnerabilities on the thousand-kilometer front.¹¹

The current operation is obviously slower and much more difficult than the previous Ukrainian counterattacks in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Kherson oblasts. There are a number of reasons why Ukraine’s ongoing counteroffensive does not resemble the previous ones. Russian fortifications, minefields, and anti-tank ditches formed a dense net that the Ukrainian forces had to navigate.¹² The clenched fist required to break through the lines was not provided by Ukrainian armor since the initial assaults became bogged down in dense, overlapping minefields. Tanks alone would not be the answer, as military experts had cautioned.¹³ They were exposed to Russian anti-tank rockets fired from the trenches and from aircraft capable of striking them from the sky because of the lack of air superiority and overwhelming artillery fire. Besides, the Ukrainian forces were equipped with mine-clearing vehicles, but not in sufficient amount. Under these circumstances, Ukraine’s military strategy shifted from attempting to breach Russian lines in a mechanized assault to a more conventional attritional approach that yielded incremental achievements.¹⁴ As of September 2023, Ukrainian forces succeeded in penetrating Russia’s first main defense lines in the Zaporizhzhia direction, and it seems that the offensive will be maintained in the upcoming months.

The Russian Goals: Have They changed?

Have the Russian goals changed? To answer this question, it is essential to comprehend Moscow’s original goals in the context of its large-scale invasion of Ukraine. Even though the Kremlin set up ‘demilitarization’ and ‘denazification’ of Ukraine as its original goals of the operation it failed to achieve either of the goals. Since these two concepts are politically motivated and serve mainly the Kremlin propaganda machine, we need to briefly explain what they actually mean. ‘Demilitarization’ of Ukraine is in fact straightforward, but it still needs clarification. It should be noted that the Kyiv authorities were determined to reform the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and destabilization of the Donbas region. While NATO has never welcomed Kyiv’s aspirations to join the Alliance, Ukraine enshrined its aspirations toward NATO membership in the Constitution in February 2019.¹⁵

The reform initiatives in the army, which were commenced by the Poroshenko administration, have been maintained by the Zelensky government.¹⁶ In June 2020, Ukraine was recognized as an Enhanced Opportunities Partner by NATO which is part of NATO’s Partnership

Interoperability Initiative aiming to maintain and deepen cooperation between Allies and partners.¹⁷ By developing multilateral and bilateral cooperations with international partners such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Türkiye among others, Ukraine aimed to abandon the legacy of the post-Soviet system and introduce a Euro-Atlantic culture to its military.¹⁸ The initiation of reforming the military was an obvious reaction of Kyiv to the Russian aggression. The Kremlin, however, was not pleased with Kyiv's policy. Russia has always tolerated the existence of Ukraine if it were militarily weak. In the early 1990s, for example, Russia and ironically the USA, put pressure on Kyiv to hand over its nuclear warheads. Because the Ukrainian army had no nuclear weapons and lacked conventional warfare capabilities Russia was able to annex Crimea without firing a single shot. According to the then Defense Minister of Ukraine Ihor Teniuk, Ukraine had 1500–2000 combat-ready soldiers in Crimea compared to 20,000 Russian troops at the time of the annexation.¹⁹ The Kremlin was therefore determined to weaken Ukraine's army before it could be reformed and strengthened. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine backfired in terms of preventing Ukraine from increasing its military capabilities. Few analysts today would disagree that Ukraine has superior military capabilities than it had before February 2022.

'Denazification' of Ukraine was another objective of Putin's Special Military Operation in Ukraine. It goes without saying that Putin has his own understanding of 'denazification' in Ukraine. According to Putin's interpretation of history, Ukrainians and Russians are the same people. For him, the Ukrainian identity is a historical project of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the project is pursued by the present West. In his 2021 article, Putin portrays Ukraine as 'anti-Moscow Russia' and concludes that the "true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia".²⁰ In other words, Ukraine is inconceivable as a sovereign nation independent of Russia. In line with Putin's worldview, Russia secured its goals in Ukraine by illegally annexing Crimea and destabilizing the Donbas region in 2014.

It is no secret that neither the EU nor NATO would accept Ukraine into their organizations, especially after the events of 2014. However, the Ukrainian government chose to concentrate on consolidating the Ukrainian identity and thereby bolstering the Ukrainian statehood rather than consenting to the 'geopolitical fate'. In this sense, the Poroshenko administration carried out a series of activities such as enacting the 'Decommunism Law' in 2015 or taking necessary measures to counter Russian propaganda in 2016. Besides, the separation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Russian Orthodox Church in 2019 was among the most significant developments that have helped to reduce Russia's influence in Ukraine. It should be noted that any effort

by the Ukrainian government to promote Ukrainian nationalism was viewed as 'Nazism' by Kremlin officials simply because they could not accept the idea of a Ukrainian nation distinct from Russians. Eventually, the 'denazification' of Ukraine became one of the reasons behind Putin's Special Military Operation in Ukraine. However, like the 'demilitarization' of Ukraine, the war backfired, and Ukrainians, more than ever, united around their state and began to resist the invasion.

Since both of the original goals of Special Military Operations failed to be accomplished, the Kremlin adopted a new strategy that can be called 'not to lose' the war. It is important to note that this strategy has been adopted not because Putin no longer desired to invade the entire country but because the Russian army was unable to advance in Ukraine. Not losing the war simply means keeping the occupied territories under Russian control. This is especially vital since those occupied regions have been declared an integral part of the Russian Federation. Therefore, Russian military officials focused on building a strong defensive line along the front line following Ukraine's Kherson offensive. In this regard, the Kremlin began to eliminate even the hardline nationalists who criticized Sergei Shoigu and Valery Gerasimov (Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation, and the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, respectively) for their inability to make further progress in Ukraine. For instance, Ivan Popov, commander of the 58th United Arms Army in occupied southern Ukraine, was abruptly dismissed after accusing the Ministry of Defence leadership of betraying his troops by failing to provide adequate support.²¹ Another example is Igor Girkin, a well-known Russian nationalist, who was detained by Russian investigators after publicly accusing President Vladimir Putin and the army's highest officials of failing to prosecute the war in Ukraine harshly or competently enough.²²

Among the critics of the Russian military decision-makers in Ukraine, Yevgeny Prigozhin should be particularly noted. Wagner PMC boss Prigozhin harshly criticized Shoigu and Gerasimov for not waging the war in Ukraine effectively. Simply, he wanted total mobilization in Russia to win the war.²³ In response, the Russian Defense Minister announced that private military

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groups must sign a contract with the defense minister by July 1, 2023.²⁴ Refusing to sign the contract, Prigozhin launched a mutiny (he called it the ‘march of justice’) against the military decision-makers on June 23. After taking over the Southern Military District headquarters in the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don his army headed to Moscow but halted the mutiny 200 km away from the capital to avoid the Russian bloodshed. Although Prigozhin put an end to the uprising before it spiraled out of control, this seriously undermined President Putin’s authority in addition to that of Shoigu and Gerasimov. Therefore, his death came as no surprise to anyone when the plane he was aboard was shot down on August 23. All in all, it appears that Putin and his inner circle are more concerned with ‘stabilizing’ the front line in Ukraine than declaring full-scale mobilization of Russian society to continue the war under the guise of a ‘great war.’ In addition, Russia did not anticipate that the war would drag on or that the West would continue to support Ukraine in the long run. Hence, once the Kremlin failed to achieve its main goal in Ukraine, it now strives not to ‘lose’ the war by securing territorial gains.

The Position of the West

Throughout the course of the war, the West’s attitude toward Russia’s invasion of Ukraine underwent a significant shift. Even while Western countries have

consistently expressed their opposition to the invasion from the very beginning of the war, they have nonetheless made it clear that they will put up with the developing conditions in Ukraine. This meant that Ukraine was left alone when Russia began its full-scale invasion. For example, the Biden administration imposed economic sanctions on Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. When President Biden was asked about the effectiveness of the sanctions in terms of halting the invasion, he replied: “Let’s have a conversation in another month or so to see if they’re working.”²⁵

Another example is Germany’s initial position regarding invasion. Andriy Melnyk, the ambassador of Ukraine to Germany, asserted that German Finance Minister Christian Lindner opposed arming Ukraine because he thought it would fall apart in a matter of hours and was prepared to engage with the Russian puppet government in Kyiv.²⁶ Germany’s approach was echoed in reality when, on the eve of the invasion, it pledged to deliver 5,000 helmets to Ukraine instead of providing Ukraine with actual and efficient armaments to stave off the Russian invasion.²⁷ In the early months of the invasion, Germany constantly delayed sending heavy weapons to Ukraine and thereby adopted an ambiguous position which, in other words, meant that it was ready to accept new circumstances.²⁸ Macron’s France preferred to keep channels open with the Kremlin in the initial days of the war. The French president tried several times,

which was characterized by Zelenskyy as a 'waste of time', to persuade Putin to end the occupation.²⁹ While prioritizing dialogue or giving diplomacy a chance to achieve peace sounds great, it was clear that Putin would hardly change his mind after launching a full-fledged invasion. Therefore, it would not be wrong to claim that at the beginning of the war, the West's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine was nothing more than an implicit acceptance of the new realities. Above and beyond all of this, implicit acceptance of the invasion by the Western countries was evident when they offered Zelenskyy evacuation rather than supplying Ukraine with weapons when the invasion started.³⁰

Nevertheless, the West's position towards the war in Ukraine began to change dramatically from April 2022 onwards. Understanding the reason behind the West's shifting position from implicitly endorsing the invasion to arming Ukraine to counter the invasion is extremely significant. It is no coincidence that the West began to shift its position immediately after the defeat of Russian troops by Ukrainian forces in the Battle of Kyiv. In this sense, it can be argued that Ukraine's month-long resistance paid off, persuading the West that backing Ukraine's defense against Russia was worthwhile. Once the risk of Kyiv falling no longer existed, the Western leaders began to visit the capital city one after another to demonstrate their support and pledge military and economic assistance to Ukraine.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was the first among the Western leaders who paid a visit to Kyiv immediately following the defeat of Russian forces at the Battle of Kyiv. It was reported that the Prime Minister visited Ukraine to express the UK's unwavering support for Ukraine and to have in-depth talks with President Zelenskyy on military and economic aid on April 9, 2022.³¹ Following the footsteps of the UK Prime Minister the presidents of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland met with Zelenskyy in Kyiv on April 13 to mobilize the international community to help Ukraine militarily.³² The Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau, visited Ukraine in May to discuss stepping up international aid in the form of financial, military, and humanitarian support for Ukraine.³³ In June, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, French President Emmanuel Macron, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, and Romanian President Klaus Iohannis arrived in Kyiv to show solidarity and meet Ukraine's requests to bolster its defense against the invasion.³⁴ Additionally, on the eve of the anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion, US President Joe Biden paid a visit to Kyiv in an effort to "reaffirm [US] commitment to Ukraine's democracy, sovereignty, and territorial integrity."³⁵

These initial visits by Western leaders were followed by a gradually increasing flow of arms into Ukraine. Initially, aid deliveries contained anti-tank weaponry like

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Nlaw or Javelin, drones like Bayraktar TB2, and artillery like M777 howitzers or long-range rocket launchers like M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS). Furthermore, Ukraine started acquiring Western-made air defense systems including IRIS-T, Starstreak, NASAMS (National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System), S-300 (from Slovakia), and even the extremely effective Patriot missile system. Along with other military supplies, Western nations also provided Bradley M2, Marder, AMX-10 RC, and Stryker armored fighting vehicles to Ukraine.³⁶ Additionally, Ukraine started receiving Western-made tanks such as the M1 Abrams, Challenger 2, and Leopard 2; as of September 2023, the possibility of sending fighter aircrafts to Ukraine is also being discussed. As a result, it can be argued that Western nations, being convinced of Ukraine's resistance, began to shift their position from implicitly accepting the occupation of Ukraine to arming it for defending itself.

Conclusion

When Putin launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, he wanted the job done quickly and kept at the regional level. This would signal to the West that the post-Soviet space is Russia's sphere of influence. He miscalculated Ukraine's resistance, and as a result, the West's backing for Ukraine, which ultimately led to the prolongation of the war and prevented Russia from attaining its primary objectives. Under such circumstances, the Kremlin focused on not losing the war, which can allow Russia to gain time to regroup and restart the war when convenient conditions are met. The Kyiv authorities are well aware of the Kremlin's intention and therefore they are trying to avoid any negotiations with Kremlin officials that would cover up the war crimes committed in Ukraine and lead to the freezing of the war, which would eventually mean postponing the war to future generations. Nevertheless, political objectives are mostly attainable if they are backed up by military force, and for this very reason Ukraine's counteroffensive is of vital importance. Without a doubt, the Ukrainian Armed Forces of today are far stronger than they were in February 2022. However, its capacity to carry on the counteroffensive is largely dependent on the continuation of Western weapons shipments into Ukraine. Putin's

chances of avoiding defeat in the war also largely depend on how long the West sustains to support Ukraine. Even though history is littered with examples of nations being abandoned in the face of occupation, there is no indication that the West's support for Ukraine is dwindling. In contrast, Western military support for the country has consistently increased since the start of the war. There is concern that if Republicans such as Donald Trump or Ron DeSantis win the US presidential election in 2024, this tendency may shift. When asked if he would continue to support Ukraine if he won the election, Trump said he would end the war within 24 hours.³⁷ Republican presidential contender and governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, has called the war in Ukraine a 'territorial dispute' that should not be of paramount importance to American national security.³⁸

Although such remarks would not be welcomed by anyone who sided with Ukraine against the invasion, it might be argued that Western support for Ukraine is unlikely to change depending on the outcome of the US election for several reasons: Russia's military capabilities are being slowly destroyed by Ukraine. As a result, the threat to NATO's eastern flank is significantly diminished. This should eventually enable the West to concentrate on China.³⁹ And it is called that it is "costing peanuts for the US to defeat Russia."⁴⁰ For example, the

United States Congress allocated \$45 billion in aid for Ukraine in 2023. This funding only accounts for 5% of the US defense expenditure for that year. In this context, Republican Senator Mitt Romney remarked that the US must continue to support Ukraine's military campaign since "decimating the Russian military" with merely 5% of the US defense budget is an "extraordinarily wise investment."⁴¹ It should also be noted that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has revived military-industrial complex of the West. For example, the United States has dramatically increased the production of 155mm artillery shells to meet Ukraine's demands.⁴² European nations have seen enormous growth in their defense spending as well.⁴³ It is interesting to observe how the military-industrial complex is making profits as a side effect of the war in Ukraine. For example, the USA delivered 18 HIMARS to Ukraine, which were used very effectively by the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and as a result, Poland ordered 486 HIMARS from the USA.⁴⁴ Therefore, even though the support from the West has been essential in helping Ukraine defend itself, the democratic world also benefits much from aiding the Ukrainian war effort. Since Western military assistance to Ukraine is unlikely to be cut off in the foreseeable future it can be concluded that the end result of the war will depend on Ukraine's success on the battlefield.

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