

# Assessment of the state of the Ukraine war May 2023

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As of June 9<sup>th</sup>, the long-anticipated Ukrainian counterattack appears to have started. From the end of May, Ukrainian activity also intensified on the southern front, and at first, it was unclear whether these are just shaping operations, or already the first wave of the counteroffensive,<sup>1</sup> but by the 9<sup>th</sup> of June it has become more and more clear that the counterattack is starting. The obvious aim of the counterattack is to reach the Sea of Azov and cut the Russian-held landbridge to the Crimea. The outcome of this counterattack will be a game-changing event, as its success could make the Crimea an unholdable cauldron, which, given the strategic importance of the Crimea for the Russians, may be sufficient to force Russia to the negotiating table on the terms of the West and Ukraine, as we discussed in our paper on a possible scenario for the end of the war. In such a situation we argued that for instance a deal in such a situation where Ukraine formally concedes Russia to keep the Crimea in exchange for Russia not only entirely pulling out from the rest of Ukraine (including the Donbas) immediately, but also approving its immediate full membership in NATO, could be the lesser evil for both sides compared to the risks of continuing the war with an uncertain outcome, and also stabilize the NATO-Russia border, outrooting future military conflict along it.<sup>2</sup> If the counterattack, on the other hand, is unsuccessful, however, that would likely turn the war into a frozen conflict for years to come. It would not only leave large chunks of Ukraine under Russian occupation, and make it impossible for Ukraine to join NATO, but also leave open the possibility of unpredictable future flare-ups of the conflict, making the region between NATO and Russia unstable for the foreseeable future. Whether the counterattack will be successful or not, is the question of the upcoming weeks, so our current assessment takes a snapshot of the state of the war at this crucial moment at the start of the counterattack. The most important event on the frontline in the second half of May was the fall of Bakhmut. Russia took the town after a 10 months siege, that started back in August. The town is the first major settlement taken by Russian forces ever since taking the twin cities of Sievierodonetsk and Lysychansk back in July 2022. The siege of the city was mostly conducted by the Wagner PMC. After the takeover of the city, Ukrainian forces conducted limited pushbacks on the Russian flanks north and south of the city to prevent further Russian advance.<sup>3</sup>

A major event of early June has been the destruction of the Nova Kakhovka dam on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June, flooding the environs of the section of the river Dnipro downriver from it. None of the belligerents took responsibility for the event, and both are accusing each other of having done it. There are however, a series of factors suggesting Russian responsibility: First, the result is tactically helping the Russian war effort, and impairing the Ukrainian one: Ukraine is preparing to launch a counterattack, of which the location of one possible thrust could have been across the Dnipro river and the Kakhovka reservoir. The destruction of the dam however replaces the reservoir with a muddy lake bed, too dry for

transport boats, but too muddy for tanks and other vehicles, virtually impenetrable at least as long as the lakebed mud dries up, and roadless even after that. The flood will also turn the environs of the lower reaches of the river down from the dam into devastated post-flood landscapes, also impenetrable for at least weeks before drying up sufficiently for tanks and other military vehicles, and with roads likely covered by debris by the flood. Second, Russia was in control of the dam, as soon as last November, news spread that it mined it, which provided it with a much easier means to conduct such an operation, while for Ukraine, the only means would have been a much more complicated and visible series of massive airstrikes, of which we have seen no signs of.<sup>4</sup> May has also seen the announcement of the delivery of the type of weapons that have not been delivered so far: Storm Shadow missiles, and F-16 aircraft.

The second half of May saw the formation of the F-16 coalition by several European supporters of Ukraine. After the United States have been refusing for months Ukrainian requests for F-16 aircraft, the UK and the Netherlands announced the establishment of a coalition of countries to provide such aircraft to Ukraine, and by the end of the month, they were joined by other European partners and gained US approval for the plan as well.<sup>5</sup> However as the number of aircraft offered is below what Ukraine would need, their role will likely be limited.<sup>6</sup>

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of May, the United Kingdom announced that it will deliver Storm Shadow missiles to Ukraine. Why this decision is an important milestone, is that the range of these missiles reaches 550 km, which is longer than that of the ATACMS missiles, that Ukraine has been requesting for long, not to mention the mere 150km range of the GLSDB missiles, the longest range missiles Ukraine already has. The Storm Shadow missiles expand the range within which Ukraine is capable to annihilate Russian fuel storages, ammunition storages, command posts, and assembly points, however, where it really bares the possibility to become a game changer, is the Kerch bridge connecting the Crimea to Russia.<sup>7</sup> Should the looming Ukrainian counterattack be successful, and cut the land bridge between Russia and the Crimea, the Kerch bridge would become the only road and railway link between them. Before the arrival of the Storm Shadow missiles, Ukraine had no equipment to reach the Kerch bridge, with those missiles however it does. Thus with the Storm shadow missiles, Ukraine gained the capability, to destroy the Kerch bridge, and thus cut all Russian road and railway links to the Crimea in case its counterattack managed to cut off the land bridge in the Zaporizhzhia region first. The training of Ukrainian forces for the use of Leopard 1 main battle tanks started in late April, and was scheduled to take about one month.<sup>8</sup> If completed, 100 Leopard main battle tanks are scheduled to be handed over to Ukraine, in addition to the 230 main battle tanks have already been delivered earlier this year, making the total number of main battle tanks delivered so far this year 330.

To update our estimates for the number of main battle tanks on each side, we use the usual formula: For Russian losses, we used a ratio halfway between losses documented by Oryx,<sup>9</sup> and those stated by the Ukrainian government,<sup>10</sup> which at this point means 46%

above Oryx levels, and assumed that Ukrainian losses are higher by the same ratio than stated by Oryx.<sup>11</sup> 1500 tanks to have disappeared from Russian storages by the end of March,<sup>12</sup> and we extrapolated that number till the 9<sup>th</sup> of June, Russia is supposed to manufacture 20 new tanks per month and refurbish 25 old tanks from storage,<sup>13</sup> and 3-4 unrefurbished tanks are needed to reassemble one functional peace from their parts,<sup>14</sup> and we add the 100 Leopard 1 tanks as well. Using these formulae, we get the numbers below for the 9<sup>th</sup> of June, which is roughly the start of the Ukrainian counterattack:

high initial basis, high losses scenario												
active main battle tanks	Russia						Ukraine					
	initial	unrefurbished from storage	refurbished	newly manufactured	losses	total active	initial	captured	received in 2022	received in 2023	losses	total active
09.6.2023	3300	429	352	286	-2962	1405	1000	272	450	330	-772	1280

An important diplomatic event of the second half of May was the China-Central Asia Summit, held in Xian on the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> of May 2023. The summit resulted in agreements and initiatives aiming to deepen cooperation between the Central Asian former Soviet republics and China, including the establishment of permanent mechanisms for their cooperation, and an emphasis on the further development of the Central Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative, and pipelines from Central Asia to China.<sup>15</sup> The overall issue of this enhancement of China-Central Asia cooperation shows signs of China broadening its influence at the expense of Russia. With permanent mechanisms of China-Central Asia cooperation announced, this seems to be the establishment of a new China-Central Asia block, excluding Russia, which in this relation is a turning point: So far multilateral cooperation between the given countries was present in the form of the SCO, that included Central Asia as well as both China and Russia, and in organizations which included Central Asian countries and Russia but not China (the Eurasian Union and the CSTO), thus permanent mechanisms including China and Central Asia, but excluding Russia is a new phenomenon. Second, the Central Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative is a route where trade between China and Europe can flow evading Russia: From China to Central Asia, then from Central Asia to Azerbaijan across the Caspian Sea, then from Azerbaijan to Europe across Georgia and Turkey. This comes after the conflict between Kazakhstan and Russia over the transit of Kazakh oil,<sup>16</sup> followed by a crackdown on alleged Russian separatists in the north of the country by Kazakh authorities,<sup>17</sup> followed by remarks by Xi Jinping, assuring Kazakhstan of China's support for its sovereignty and

territorial integrity.<sup>18</sup> To sum it up, China appears to pursue a policy in Central Asia, that is virtually identical with what the West pursued in Ukraine, and what Russia cited as a casus belli. However with Russia tied down by its conflict with the West, and highly dependent on trade with China due to Western sanctions, it is in no position to stand up to these Chinese policies in Central Asia.

A new phenomenon of the second half of May 2023 has been raids from Ukraine across the border into Russia. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May, the Russian anti-government paramilitary groups "Freedom of Russia Legion" and Russian Volunteer Corps crossed the border into the Belgorod Region and took a few villages. The incursion was repelled the next day, but then on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June, a similar incursion occurred into the Belgorod Region as well at another section of the border and held some territory for days. The purpose of these incursions may be twofold, one on the psychological level, and another on the tactical level: On the psychological level, they distract public attention from the fall of Bakhmut, and also may embarrass Russia by trying to raise doubts regarding its capabilities to secure its borders. Ukrainian claims that Ukraine has nothing to do with equipping these groups, which are obviously false, seem to be a psychological step, aiming to mock Russia's claims between 2014 and 2022, when Russia stated it had nothing to do with equipping the armed forces of the pro-Russian separatist polities, the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, arguing that their equipment could be bought at any military chop, despite the fact that said equipment included main battle tanks and other heavy weaponry. By using an identical argument, Ukraine mocked, or one could even say, "trolled" the Russian narrative of the previous years. On the tactical level, how Russia can prevent the embarrassment of such incursions occurring in the future is strengthening border defenses, for which it would need extra troops, and this may make it move some troops to the border region from southern Ukraine, where the Ukrainian counterattack is looming. Therefore, the tactical aim of the incursions may be this: To distract not only Russian attention, but also some Russian troops from southern Ukraine, and thus make the path of the upcoming Ukrainian counterattack somewhat less difficult.<sup>19</sup>

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2023/06/07/ukraines-counter-offensive-is-gathering-pace>
- <sup>2</sup> <https://danubeinstitute.hu/hu/kutatas/how-the-war-in-ukraine-might-end-part-1>
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/kremlin%E2%80%99s-pyrrhic-victory-bakhmut-retrospective-battle-bakhmut>
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-6-2023>
- <sup>5</sup> <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/05/denmark-netherlands-to-lead-f-16-training-coalition-for-ukrainian-pilots-austin/>
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/ukraine-f16-fighter-jets-russia-mig29-pilots-training-export-1802024>
- <sup>7</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65813770>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://mil.in.ua/en/news/ukrainian-servicemen-begin-mastering-leopard-1-tanks/>
- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/attack-on-europe-documenting-equipment.html>
- <sup>10</sup> <https://www.minusrus.com/en>
- <sup>11</sup> <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/02/attack-on-europe-documenting-ukrainian.html>
- <sup>12</sup> <https://youtu.be/2PHUK6zkbpc>
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2023/02/27/how-quickly-can-russia-rebuild-its-tank-fleet>
- <sup>14</sup> <https://nadinbrzezinski.medium.com/logistics-collapse-945984f5d48e>
- <sup>15</sup> <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2023/05/23/all-agreements-grants-and-initiatives-approved-at-the-central-asia-china-summit/>
- <sup>16</sup> <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-beijing-and-moscow-clash-over-kazakhstans-oil>
- <sup>17</sup> [https://central.asia-news.com/en\\_GB/articles/cnmi\\_ca/features/2022/08/12/feature-01](https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2022/08/12/feature-01)
- <sup>18</sup> <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Xi-vows-to-back-Kazakh-sovereignty-in-Central-Asia-power-play>
- <sup>19</sup> <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-4-2023>