

Assessment of the state
of the Ukraine War,
October 2023

Csaba Barnabás Horváth

Oct 2023

Assessment of the state of the Ukraine War, October 2023

Csaba Barnabás Horváth

The main objective of this summer's Ukrainian counteroffensive was to cut the Russian land corridor, and the supply lines to Crimea. Such a move, combined with the destruction of the Kerch bridge would have cut Crimea off from Russian supplies, occasioning its fall within months. Of all the Russian-held territories of Ukraine, Crimea is the most important for Russia in almost every single aspect. Crimea controls much of the Black Sea, not only from a strategic aspect but also from its natural gas fields. It also represents a key strategic asset in the rear of Ukraine, as we could see during the first phase of the invasion in 2022 when the thrust from Crimea turned out to be the most successful, and it also blocks the exit to the Sea of Azov, thus access to Ukraine's ports on that sea. From a demographic aspect, Crimea has the highest share of ethnic Russians, being the only region where they actually are the majority.¹ On the emotional level, Crimea has the most important significance for the Russian public, especially the town of Sevastopol. Therefore, cutting off Crimea would have been a game changer, enabling Ukraine to either negotiate a favorable compromise, asking everything else in exchange for leaving just this single province for Russia, as we suggested in our earlier papers, or radically tilting the balance of the war by taking it. This objective was also suggested by Ukraine dedicating its main effort to the southern front, attempting two main thrusts, one near the town of Orikhiv, and another near the town of Velyka Novosilka. Russia was also obviously aware of this and built an extensive defense line to protect the land corridor to Crimea from prospective Ukrainian counteroffensives.

What set the limits of the time window available for the counteroffensive are the spring and autumn mud seasons, the so-called rasputitsa, which makes mud so deep and sticky, that it prevents off-road movement by tanks. Due to an unusually cool and rainy spring, the spring mud season of 2023 lasted till June, preventing the counteroffensive from starting before that. Ukraine was lucky with the autumn, as it has been so far unusually warm and dry, thus the fighting season may last as far as November. However as of mid-October 2023, Ukraine still hasn't achieved the necessary breakthrough, and, even if the fighting season lasts till November, Ukraine is increasingly likely to run out of time.

After weeks of shaping operations, Ukraine launched its counteroffensive in early June, but soon the operation got stuck in massive Russian minefields. After the first wave in early June by and large failed, the Ukrainian side opted to halt their main attack, and return to shaping operations, to avoid irreparable losses, till more favorable conditions for another major attempt are achieved. Out of the twelve brigades accumulated for the counteroffensive, they continued the operation with only three, keeping the other nine in reserve for the main action. The frontline was largely static during most of the summer, then the Ukrainians launched their main attack in the second half of August. For a few weeks, it seemed that this second attempt to break the Russian lines had a realistic chance to be successful, but by mid-October however, it became clear that even this second wave of the counteroffensive had stalled.

The Russian position consist of a fortified defence with a three-line depth. The first line is a massive minefield with some trenches, while the second and third line mainly consist of trenches, enforced by anti-tank ditches. Somewhat confusingly, the second and third layers are often mentioned as the Surovikin 1 and Surovikin 2 lines, as the first line, due to it having fewer trenches and anti-tank ditches, but despite having a far more extensive minefield, is not counted as one of the Surovikin lines. Ukrainian general Oleksandr Tarnavsky estimated that Russia put 60% of its fortification efforts into the first line, and only 20%-20% into the two Surovikin lines.² After breaching the first line in August 2023 south of Orikhiv, and advancing further beyond it, Ukrainian forces managed to also breach the second layer, confusingly called Surovikin 1, near the village of Verbove in September. This indicated the possible breach of the last line, that would open the way to the sea. However as of mid-October 2023 it seems that Ukraine couldn't manage to widen the breach sufficiently to be able to advance beyond it. This increasingly suggests that despite having achieved partial success, the Ukrainian counteroffensive has by and large failed, as it couldn't achieve the strategic objective of cutting the supply lines to Crimea.

On the other hand, while according to the classical Clausewitz rule, in any offensive operation, the attackers have to outnumber the defenders by a 3 to 1 ratio, Russian tactics made the ratio in losses much more favorable for the Ukrainian side: Instead of merely waiting in their fortified defense positions, the Russian tactic pursued counterpunches against the Ukrainian offensive, to keep the initiative, and to distract Ukrainian forces from their main effort. Thus on the operational level, during the Ukrainian counteroffensive, several episodes occurred, where the Russian side was the attacker. Moreover, Russia also attempted an offensive of its own in the northeastern corner of

Ukraine, near the town of Kupyansk in the Luhansk region. Therefore, the overall ratio in losses during the summer of 2023 was still favorable to Ukraine. Russia has lost twice as many fighting vehicles during this summer period than Ukraine. While this is less favorable for Ukraine than the 3,9 to 1 ratio of the summer of 2022, or the 6,7 to 1 ratio of early 2022, it is still surprisingly favorable given that theoretically, Ukraine is waging the offence during this period.³ Regarding human military casualties, US estimates as of mid-August 2023 were 120 thousand killed, and 170-180 thousand injured on the Russian side, while 70 thousand were killed, and 100-120 thousand injured on the Ukrainian side for the entirety of the conflict since February 24th, 2022.⁴

One additional important episode of the counteroffensive was the coup attempt by the Wagner group in June, led by Evgeny Prigozhin. We discussed the coup attempt itself in our earlier report, but its real importance seems to be in its aftermath. The coup attempt was followed by what appeared to be a purge of the Russian military command. General Surovikin, who was in charge of the entire Ukraine operation earlier in 2023 went missing for two months and appeared in public only after the death of Prigozhin. General Teplinsky of Russia's elite airborne troops was also rumored to face arrest, however after the airborne units threatened to abandon their positions, should Teplinsky face any harm, no arrest happened. Colonel General Popov of the 58th Combined Arms Army, Major General Seliverstov of the 106th Guards Airborne Division, and Major General Kornev of the 7th Airborne Division were reported to have been removed from their positions, while Major General Ibatullin of the 90th Tank Division was arrested along with two of his deputies.⁵ Last but not least Prigozhin was killed by an explosion on his private jet exactly 60 days after the coup. This aftermath has several implications. First, it shows that the Putin regime lacked the strength to either crack down on the coup attempt openly by military force while it was happening or to arrest Prigozhin after it. Instead, Putin opted to first make a deal with Prigozhin, grant him immunity, and then assassinate him while he was traveling on an unarmed private jet. Second, the purge in the military also suggests widespread discontent among high-ranking officers of the Russian armed forces. With the purge and the assassination of Prigozhin, Putin solidified his position in the short term, but this showed vulnerability in the long run, and also severely damaged Putin's credibility as he also failed to keep his word regarding the deal he made with Prigozhin, sending a dubious message to the Russian elite. These vulnerabilities could potentially fuel a collapse or at least a serious crisis of the regime, should an overwhelming outside event hit the system. However, no such reverse has occurred since the summer. A Ukrainian breakthrough cutting off Crimea from Russian supplies, would be such, however, it has

not happened, and unless there is a radical change in US strategy regarding the war, it may not happen in the foreseeable future.

The course of the counteroffensive increasingly shows a lack of comprehensive strategy on behalf of the United States regarding the support of Ukraine. The US appears to have two, opposing considerations. Had it coherently followed the logic of each of these two, the war would have already been over. However, it increasingly seems, that being unable to decide between the two the US chose a middle ground combining the negative side of both of the two, without the positive side of any of the two. Up until the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, one could have thought that the US did have a coherent strategy, and even after the initial wave of the offensive failed in June, one could have hoped for correction up until early autumn. As of mid-October 2023 however, it became obvious that the US lacked a comprehensive strategy, and is only lagging behind events.

One of the two US considerations seems to have been a fear of a Russian victory, while the other seems to have been a fear of a Russian defeat, out of the fear of either a Russian nuclear retaliation, or a Russian regime collapse and the subsequent chaos, or both. The two rational options seemed to have been either to invest in a swift victory by delivering the necessary equipment and sweep out the Russians out of Ukraine quickly or if the fear of the consequences of a Russian defeat were judged to be more important, then broker a ceasefire quickly, freezing the conflict along the current line of control. But what is currently happening seems to be neither of these two options, but a middle ground that combines the negative aspects of both dragging out the conflict without achieving victory.

For a Ukrainian breakthrough, the US should have delivered sufficient equipment, but it didn't. The US delivered 31 M1 Abrams tanks to Ukraine. On the other hand, it has more than six thousand of this type of main battle tanks, and 3700 of them are not even in use, but in storage.⁶ Thus it could have easily delivered not 31, but ten times as many tanks if it wanted to. The Abrams tanks only arrived in September, but as the Ukrainian capability for major counteroffensives has been obvious by the Kharkiv counteroffensive of September 2022 at the latest, it should have delivered them by the start of the counteroffensive in June. The US also approved the delivery of F-16 aircraft by other NATO member states in August⁷ and announced the decision to send ATACMS long-range precision missiles in September.⁸ The US further announced it would send cluster ammunition for artillery in July,⁹ but cluster ammunition for missiles only arrived in September.¹⁰

Had the US had acted decisively regarding the Ukrainian counteroffensive after the successful Ukrainian counterattacks during the fall of 2022, these weapon systems could have already been in place by the start of the counteroffensive in early June 2023, and in far larger quantities. Had Ukraine been given the chance to start the counteroffensive with hundreds of M1 Abrams tanks, F-16 Aircraft, ATACMS missiles, cluster ammunition in both its artillery and missiles, etc. the picture would have certainly been significantly different, and Ukraine could have made a breakthrough and cut Crimea off from Russian supplies by the middle of the summer of 2023, and peace negotiations could be going on by now, with Crimea as a bargaining chip.

If defeating Russia was considered too risky, and freezing the conflict by a ceasefire along the current line of control was viewed as the safer option, then the rational decision would have been to broker such a ceasefire sometime around December 2022. The last major successful Ukrainian counteroffensive occurred in November 2022, with the retaking of Kherson. There have been no major changes of control since then. Thus a ceasefire brokered right after that in December 2022 would have been no worse regarding control of territory, than one that could be brokered in the upcoming months, should the Ukrainian counterattack fail, as seems to be more and more likely. Moreover, while Russian propaganda will have a good chance to frame such a ceasefire in the upcoming months as a limited Russian victory, having withstood the Ukrainian counterattack, had an identical ceasefire been brokered last December, it would have been difficult to deny it being a limited Ukrainian victory. And of course, Ukraine would have been spared the continuing damaging cost of war in terms of men and materiel.

The conflict would have been over by now, had the US had a clear strategy. The US however seems to have failed to make up its mind about whether to defeat Russia or to arrange a ceasefire. In an effort to find a middle ground between these two options, it instead managed to drag out the war without achieving a victory. Whether the US will be able to make up its mind for either of the two available solutions, will be the main question over the next months.

Endnotes

¹ <http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/02/everything-is-ahead-of-us-ukraine-breaks-russias-first-line-of-defence-in-stronghold>

³ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/seizing-initiative-ukraine-waging-war-defense-dominant-world>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/18/us/politics/ukraine-russia-war-casualties.html>

⁵ <https://tvpworld.com/71348902/russian-mod-dismisses-arrests-high-rank-officers-as-disgruntlement-spreads-isw>

⁶ <https://www.rferl.org/a/abrams-tanks-ukraine-/32238725.html>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-approves-sending-f-16s-ukraine-denmark-netherlands-2023-08-17/>

⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/us-will-send-ukraine-atacms-long-range-missiles-biden-tells-zelenskiy-nbc-2023-09-22/>

⁹ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/cluster-munitions-what-are-they-and-why-united-states-sending-them-ukraine>

¹⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-eyes-long-range-missiles-armed-with-cluster-bombs-ukraine-officials-2023-09-11/>