



Victory Strategy: Ukraine Demonstrating Military Calculations behind Offensive in Russia

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The Ukrainian offensive in the Kursk Oblast in Russia is, for now, only a tactical success. Operational gains related to the change in the situation on the Donbas front are uncertain. However, the risk associated with extending the front and engaging well-trained troops on Russian territory may pay off if the offensive persuades the U.S. to allow the use of ATACMS missiles to strike targets deep inside Russian territory.

Since the offensive in the Kursk Oblast began on 6 August, Ukrainian troops consisting of several thousand soldiers (the equivalent of 2-4 brigades) have driven about 30 km into Russian territory. According to Ukrainian data, they control approximately 1,300 km² and about 100 settlements. The largest of them is Sudzha (around 5,000 inhabitants before the attack), where the only measurement station for the Russian gas export system to the EU is located. To the west of the main axis of attack, Ukrainian forces used Himars launchers to destroy bridges over the Seym River, cutting off 1,000-3,000 Russian soldiers from support and making it more difficult for Russia to defend additional territory. In the east, Ukrainian troops may threaten transport routes for logistical support to Russian troops attacking towards Kharkiv. Ukrainian troops also are launching sporadic attacks on border posts in the Belgorod Oblast, east of the territory they control.

Tactical and Operational Significance. Ukrainian troops achieved this tactical success through surprise, good reconnaissance, and the ability to conduct a joint force operation using troops trained and armed by Western partners. During the operation, around 600 Russian soldiers were taken prisoner, which facilitated another prisoner exchange on 24 August, during which the sides released 115 people each. After the first days of a chaotic, uncoordinated defence, Russia began to strengthen its

potential in the region. The progress of Ukrainian forces has slowed, but they still maintain the initiative.

The offensive, which led to the extension of Ukrainian defence lines and the involvement of elite troops outside the territory of Ukraine, has not yet brought operational benefits. President Volodymyr Zelensky and the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian army, Oleksandr Syrski, announced that the goal was to make it difficult for Russia to attack Kharkiv (about 1.4 million inhabitants) and Sumy (around 260,000) and to draw away some of Russia's forces from Donbas (Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts). The attack on the Kursk Oblast so far has not lessened Russian shelling in the Sumy region or the Russian offensive in Donbas, which is a priority for Russia. Since Russia does not fully control any of the four regions it annexed in September 2022, the occupation of Donbas may make it easier for the Russian authorities to present the war as a success. After many months of fighting for Avdiivka, which was occupied in February this year, Russian forces moved about 30 km east at the cost of high losses and approached to within several kilometres of Pokrovsk (60,000 inhabitants before war), an important industrial centre and logistics hub for the Ukrainian army. Its capture may make it easier for Russian troops to seize other towns and eventually the entire Donbas.

In May, Russia also opened a new front in the northeast, under the pretext of creating a buffer zone and limiting

Ukrainian attacks in the Belgorod region. Bringing Russian troops within artillery range of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city and an important industrial centre, could trigger an exodus of residents, which would further destabilise Ukraine. However, Russia's main goal in this region seems to be to stretch Ukrainian forces and weaken the defence in Donbas.

According to the Ukrainian authorities, the Russian command transferred additional soldiers to the Kursk Oblast, but these were mainly troops from deep inside Russia and from less important sections of the front (including the Kherson and Zaporozhian Oblasts). Since, on average, a three-fold advantage in military potential is needed to break through a defence line, further strengthening of Russian forces may be necessary to defeat the Ukrainian grouping. Russia will have to strengthen the defence of its borders and the Belgorod Oblast adjacent to the Kursk Oblast. The main challenge for the Russian leadership will be the lack of trained reserves consisting of contract soldiers. Independent sources indicate that in recent weeks Russian troops suffered greater losses on the front than before. The withdrawal of some units from Ukraine may require filling the shortage with conscripts, contrary to Putin's earlier promises that they would not be forced to participate in combat operations.

Strategic Gains. The Ukrainian authorities are using the operation to put pressure on the U.S. to lift restrictions on the use of ATACMS missiles to hit targets in Russia. In response to Russian attacks on critical infrastructure and civilian targets, the U.S. began to supply Ukraine with ATACMS missiles with a range of up to 300 km, but limits the use of them to Russian targets on Ukrainian territory (including Crimea). In response to Russia's attempt to open a new front towards Kharkiv, the U.S. and other Western countries agreed that their weapons can be used to attack military targets on Russian territory, however primarily shorter-range weapons, such as barrel artillery (range up to 40 km) or rocket artillery (Himars systems with a range of up to 80 km). Some countries are allowing the use of donated F-16 aircraft, which, however, are not armed with long-range missiles. In July this year, a Pentagon spokesman presented the fear of escalation from Russia as a justification for restrictions on the use of such missiles and warned against the conflict spreading beyond Ukrainian territory.

According to President Zelensky, the offensive shows that fears of escalation from Russia are unfounded. According to the Institute for the Study of War, American ATACMS missiles could be used to attack about 250 military and paramilitary targets, such as bases, airports, and logistic hubs, that Russia uses in support of its offensive in Donbas. Ukraine has received a small number of ATACMS missiles, but it is also supplied with long-range systems by the United Kingdom (Storm Shadow), France (SCALP), and probably Italy (Storm Shadow). A U.S. decision to allow greater use of ATACMS would therefore open the way to the use of weapons also provided by other countries. The U.S. could

additionally strengthen Ukraine's strike potential by providing it with JAASM missiles (in ranges of 370 km or 1,600 km, depending on the version), which can be launched by F-16 aircraft.

Since the beginning of the year, Ukraine has been intensifying attacks on targets in Russia using domestically produced drones, but their effectiveness is much lower than that of Western missiles armed with much more powerful warheads and more effective in defeating Russian defence systems. The use of these missiles would also require Western support in reconnaissance and targeting, which would make it easier to destroy the most important military targets. Even though Ukraine announced that it is producing a new type of rocket drone and possibly a ballistic missile, these claims are difficult to verify and the new systems may not be available in significant numbers for some time.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The Ukrainian offensive is a tactical success, which now must be transformed into operational gains related to Ukraine regaining the initiative on the front. Since the failed Ukrainian counter-offensive in the Kherson Oblast last summer, Russia has had a clear strategic advantage. This was influenced by, among others, delays in the deliveries of Western equipment, Zelensky's hesitation to lower the age of conscripts from 27 to 25, as well as problems with command and coordination of actions at the tactical level. Russian troops have an advantage in terms of soldiers, armament, and artillery ammunition. Even lowering the age of conscripts and increasing the size of the Ukrainian armed forces may not be enough to make a breakthrough on the front. The use of several well-trained and armed operational brigades to attack Russian territory may worsen the problems with stabilising the front in Donbas, where Russia has a four- or even five-fold advantage. This will expose the Ukrainian command to accusations that by redirecting selected units, it is weakening the defence of towns like Pokrovsk.

It cannot be ruled out that one of the most important goals of the offensive is to increase pressure on the U.S. to lift restrictions on the use of long-range systems. The main element of Ukraine's victory strategy probably is attacking Russian energy infrastructure with Ukrainian-made drones, which has already created noticeable problems, such as restrictions on the production and export of fuel and power outages. The second element may be the destruction of military targets behind the front, also on Russian territory, in order to weaken Russia's ability to conduct an offensive in the main strategic direction. Preventing Russia from taking control of Donbas at acceptable costs would increase the chances that it would enter into negotiations with Ukraine. Zelensky emphasises that the offensive is part of the victory strategy that he intends to present to the U.S. president in September this year. He will be able to argue that he has a plan to force Russia to negotiate and end the conflict on terms acceptable for Ukraine but that American fears of escalation prevent it from being implemented.