



## War of Attrition: What Next for Military Operations in Ukraine?

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Ukraine's offensive operations since June this year have not resulted in a breakthrough, but they have proven the country's determination to retake Russian-occupied territory. The counter-offensive has also highlighted Ukraine's problems with a lack of equipment and training. At the same time, the Russians have learnt lessons from their defeats in 2022. Comprehensive international support will be necessary for Ukraine to continue liberating its territory, one element of which should be the transfer of equipment that gives it an advantage on the frontline.

Despite the commitment of considerable resources—12 brigades of around 50,000 troops in total (NATO countries helped to form nine of them), Ukraine has not managed to carry out operations this year that change the frontline in its favour. Currently, the heaviest fighting is taking place in the area of Robotyne, Avdiivka, Klishchiivka, and Bakhmut. In recent weeks, the Russians have seized the initiative on the frontline to a small extent and have carried out further large-scale missile attacks on Ukrainian cities.

**Russia's Increased Military Effectiveness.** After setbacks in 2022, when Russia failed to subjugate Ukraine and Russian forces had to withdraw from parts of the occupied territories, they raised their effectiveness in 2023. They also began to adapt the tactics they were using to the main task of maintaining the occupied territories.

As recently as December 2022, the Russians began building a network of fortifications along the frontline consisting of trenches, anti-tank barricades, and others which prevented Ukraine from launching a rapid offensive. In addition, they moved away from the widespread use of battalion-based tactical groups (BGTs) to small task forces (small assault groups). Artillery was subordinated to the grouping commands, and artillery units began to use drones *en masse*, which facilitated reconnaissance and fire guidance. In many cases, instead of howitzers, the Russians began to use older types of tanks as artillery. This increased the mobility of the units conducting shelling of Ukrainian positions and

provided the opportunity to attack them primarily at the moment of troop rotation when it was easiest to inflict significant losses. Some of the older tank types were also used as infantry fighting vehicles. The Russians also improved the protection of their heavy equipment against drone attacks and loitering munitions.

The Russian Armed Forces also began to use electronic warfare measures on a much wider scale, which caused significant losses to Ukrainian UAVs. Meanwhile, by conducting systematic massed drone and ballistic missile attacks, the Russians are depleting Ukrainian air defence capabilities and resources, raising the threat to civilians, military facilities, and critical infrastructure.

Russia has also strengthened its reserve call-up system and acquired artillery munitions from North Korea and Iran, among others. It has also increased the production capacity of its armaments plants, allowing it to replenish the losses of heavy weaponry incurred in the fighting in Ukraine.

**Ukrainian Counteroffensive.** Although the Ukrainian Armed Forces, at the cost of high losses, recaptured about 250 square kilometres of occupied territory and carried out several attacks on Russian ships and military infrastructure, Ukraine failed to achieve its stated counteroffensive objectives of establishing a corridor to the Azov Sea and possibly launching operations towards Crimea. The reason for this was an increase in the effectiveness of the Russian

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Armed Forces and Ukraine's systemic problems, including the depletion of mobilisation potential.

The lack of Ukrainian air superiority and the combat experience of the units in charge of the operation were also responsible for the failure of the counter-offensive. A reason for the lack of success was also the late start of military operations (originally planned for April) due to the Ukrainian command's fear of suffering heavy losses and unfavourable weather conditions. The two-month delay gave Russia time to build up its fortifications. On the other hand, one of the reasons for the inability to take action in the occupied parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions and towards Crimea was the blowing up of the dam on the Dnieper at Novaya Kakhovka on 6 June. On the other hand, the massive need for minesweeping of areas in front of the line of fortifications prevented the Ukrainian army from using armoured equipment on a large scale, partly due to the insufficient number of minesweepers used for demining.

**Possible Future Course of the Conflict.** A stalemate in military action in Ukraine has been apparent in recent months, with neither side having the potential to resolve the war in its favour. Given the strengthening of Russian forces in the occupied territories, it can be expected that Russia is preparing for a prolonged war. This is also evidenced by the gradual increase in the size of the Russian Armed Forces and a significant increase in arms spending to a record 6% of GDP in 2024-2025.

The long duration of the conflict will further Russia's goals of depleting Ukraine's military, demographic, and economic potential. Russia is also counting on war fatigue among primarily the U.S. and members of NATO and the EU. It assumes that, with a prolonged conflict, these countries will not have the technical or financial capacity, as well as the political will, to support Ukraine to the degree comparable to 2022-2023.

The further course of the conflict may therefore be similar to the way hostilities have been conducted since the end of 2022, as both sides do not have sufficient potential to break through the enemy's defensive lines. However, if the scale of their losses continues at the current level, this will mean a proportionally faster draining of Ukrainian resources in the longer term. It could also prove dangerous for Ukraine if the Russians decide to open up a new operational direction, for example, towards Kharkiv, forcing it to disperse its defence forces.

**Key Challenges for Ukraine.** The need to conduct a prolonged conflict will mean a number of challenges for Ukraine. The most important will be to maintain

international interest in the war and the existing level of military and financial support. In military terms, it will be crucial for Ukraine to acquire an active defence capability. The Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, has prioritised electronic warfare capabilities, the acquisition of aviation to support ground operations and long-range rocket artillery to hit targets at the rear of the frontline, making it significantly more difficult for Russia to supply fighting units.

The challenges of the deteriorating demographic and economic situation will be significant, making it significantly more difficult for Ukraine to conduct military operations in the long term. The long duration of the war will also mean a declining level of training of Ukrainian soldiers and weakening morale, which has so far been a strength of the Ukrainian army.

**Conclusions and Perspectives.** The lack of capabilities that could give Ukraine an advantage over Russia will lead to the prolongation of the conflict and thus the destruction of the Ukrainian state. Despite losses, this is a win-win scenario for Russia, which is counting on the collapse of the Ukrainian authorities and the disruption of its cooperation with the West, which will be a partial realisation of the objectives of its "special military operation".

The ongoing war will also be the biggest obstacle for Ukraine in its integration into the EU and NATO. It will also prevent the country's economic development. It will also make it difficult for Western countries to maintain public interest in the war.

To break the impasse, Ukraine needs capabilities to gain an advantage over Russia, including the transfer of fighter aircraft, long-range rocket artillery, and electronic warfare systems in particular. The EU and U.S. should also accelerate commitments to produce munitions for the country. It is also necessary to train as many Ukrainian soldiers as possible to make appropriate use of Western equipment and to help increase arms production in Ukraine. The sooner it receives meaningful support, the greater the chances that it will be able to prevent Russia from achieving its political and military objectives and then lead to victory.

The lack of success on the Ukrainian front will also be a challenge for NATO countries, as Russian propaganda will use it to convince its own and international public opinion that Russia has won the war. This will make it easier for Russia to influence the threat perception of NATO and EU states and undermine the cohesion of the West. It may also encourage it to step up its hybrid activities and even, decide to directly confront NATO.