

# Special Edition Campaign Assessment: Ukraine's Strike Campaign Against Crimea

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*ISW is publishing this special edition update on Ukraine's strike campaign against Crimea in addition to its regular daily update for October 8.*

**Key Takeaway:** *Ukrainian forces have conducted a campaign of strikes against Russian military infrastructure, headquarters, and logistics routes in Crimea since June 2023 in order to degrade the Russian military's ability to use Crimea as a staging and rear area for Russian defensive operations in southern Ukraine. Ukrainian strikes on logistics routes are disrupting Russian supplies to Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Oblast. Strikes on Black Sea Fleet assets are degrading its role as a combined arms headquarters but have not defeated it as a naval force. Ukrainian strikes generate outsized morale shocks among Russian commanders and in the Russian information space. Western provision of long-range missiles to Ukraine would amplify this ongoing, essential, and timely campaign to weaken Russia's ability to defend southern Ukraine.*

**Ukrainian forces began a successful and ongoing campaign of strikes on Russian military infrastructure in Crimea in summer 2023, intended to degrade Russia's ability to use Crimea as a key staging and rear area for Russian operations in southern Ukraine.** Ukrainian forces conducted a series of strikes on Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in Crimea – including the Chonhar and Henichesk Bridges, and likely the Kerch Strait Bridge – during the first phases of Ukraine's counteroffensive in June 2023 to disrupt Russia's ability to provide personnel and material to defensive operations in southern Ukraine.[1] Ukrainian forces have since then consistently targeted Russian airfields, air defense systems, command posts, and supply depots in Crimea and along the Crimea-Melitopol-Rostov-on-Don route.[2] Ukrainian military officials including Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi have stated that Ukraine's interdiction campaign has successfully degraded Russian logistics and defensive systems, and Ukraine has increasingly expanded its strike campaign to target Russian naval assets.[3]

**The Russian military used Crimea as a springboard for its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and continues to use it as a key staging area.** The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) likely considers Crimea a "platsdarm" – a Russian military term roughly translated as "bridgehead," but defined more broadly as an area that a military can use to concentrate forces and use as a starting point for military operations.[4] Russian forces, primarily from the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) and other Southern Military District (SMD) formations, began concentrating personnel and equipment in Crimea and conducting exercises in 2021 in the buildup to the February 2022 invasion.[5] The Russian axis of advance north from Crimea achieved greater successes than Russia's multiple other axes during the first weeks of the full-scale invasion, and ISW previously assessed that Russian forces advancing out of Crimea (including elements of the SMD, 7th Airborne (VDV) Division, and Black Sea Fleet) had higher readiness and performed more effectively than Russian forces in northern and eastern Ukraine.[6]

**The Russian military continues to use Crimea as the primary rear area for Russian forces defending against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in southern Ukraine and would use Crimea to support any future offensive operations in this region.** The Russian military continues to use rail lines and roads in Crimea to transit military personnel, equipment, fuel, and lubricants intended for Russian frontline operations in southern Ukraine, supporting the longer supply route from Rostov Oblast, Russia, across occupied southern Ukraine.[7] Russian forces have

also consistently used major Crimean cities including Sevastopol, Armyansk, and Dzhankoi as military logistics hubs.[8] *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Radio Svoboda* reported in April 2023 that the Russian military operated multiple military hospitals in Sevastopol, Simferopol, and Fedosia with a total of 1,250 beds and that Russian officials closed these hospitals to civilian patients about three months prior to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and Russia has leveraged these hospitals to treat wounded Russian personnel throughout the war.[9]

**Ukrainian forces are conducting precision strikes on Black Sea Fleet (BSF) elements in addition to strikes on Russian logistics routes and hubs, likely disrupting its role as a combined arms – not strictly naval – headquarters coordinating Russian ground operations in southern Ukraine.** Despite its name, the BSF is a major combined arms formation, roughly equivalent in stature to Russia's land Combined Arms Armies. In addition to naval surface and submarine warfare elements, the BSF formally controls several surface-to-surface missile batteries and air defense batteries which have been deployed to occupied southern Ukraine; the 22nd Army Corps; and Naval Infantry elements.[10] Russian fleet and army headquarters are additionally designed to flexibly take control of attached units, and the BSF is likely responsible for commanding some portion of Russian volunteer formations and other irregular units in southern Ukraine. The BSF is also likely responsible for maintaining Russian logistics between Krasnodar Krai and Crimea to the Russian southern grouping of forces, as the BSF is the only formal Russian military structure with a long-term presence in occupied Ukraine.[11] Satellite imagery published on September 22 indicates that Ukrainian forces conducted a precise strike on the BSF headquarters despite Russian air defenses and electronic warfare capabilities.[12] Ukrainian military officials reported that the September 22 Ukrainian strike on the BSF Command headquarters occurred during a meeting of senior BSF officials and reportedly wounded 105 Russian personnel including the commander of the Russian grouping of forces in the Zaporizhia direction, Colonel General Alexander Romanchuk, and killed 34 BSF officers.[13] Ukrainian Navy Spokesperson Captain Third Rank Dmytro Pletenchuk stated that the loss of unspecified BSF leadership will likely cause significant challenges to command and control because junior commanders lack the initiative to make individual decisions.[14] Pletenchuk also reported that some unspecified mechanisms of the BSF have become inoperable due to the BSF's centralization of command.[15]

**Ukrainian strikes against BSF naval assets and repair facilities in Crimea may be preventing BSF naval elements from fully conducting their desired missions, though BSF elements remain capable of conducting most wartime operations, and assertions Ukraine has driven away or defeated the BSF are premature.** A Ukrainian missile strike on Sevastopol damaged a Russian landing ship, Kilo-class submarine, and the state-owned ship repair facility Sevmorzavod on September 13.[16] Satellite imagery published on October 1 and 3 shows that Russian forces transferred at least 10 vessels from Sevastopol to Novorossiysk, Krasnodar Krai, likely to protect them from continued Ukrainian strikes.[17] Further satellite imagery taken on October 6 confirms that at least thirteen vessels, including at least one Kalibr missile-equipped warship, remain in Sevastopol, and it is premature to state Ukraine has defeated or driven away the BSF.[18] The threat of Ukrainian strikes on BSF vessels may be prompting Russian command to withdraw some vessels away from the shore of occupied southern Ukraine. Russian withdrawals from the coast may partially impede Russia's ability to conduct regular patrols and close support of defensive operations in southern Ukraine but do not remove Russia's seaborne strike capabilities entirely. Russian vessels could continue to strike Ukraine with Kalibr cruise missiles and other systems even if the Russian military chooses to move vessels from Sevastopol to Novorossiysk, and Russian forces have conducted multiple sea-based Kalibr cruise missile strikes since Ukrainian military officials officially acknowledged the interdiction campaign.[19]

However, Ukrainian strikes on Russian vessels and Russia's decision to withdraw vessels from the western Black Sea likely have limited the ability of BSF vessels to threaten Ukraine's "grain corridor" in the Black Sea. Russia likely intended to impose a blockade following Russia's departure from the Black Sea grain deal without having to formally commit warships and legally declare a blockade, but at least six commercial vessels have successfully traveled to Ukraine through the unofficial corridor since July 2023.[20] The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on September 26 that Ukrainian strikes have diminished the BSF's ability to conduct wide security patrols, conduct routine maintenance, and enforce blockades of Ukrainian ports despite continuing to execute its core capabilities.[21]

**Ukrainian strikes are successfully degrading Russian air defenses, possibly enabling future strikes on key Russian assets.** *Suspilne Crimea* reported on September 21 that Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) sources stated that the SBU and the Ukrainian Navy enabled a successful Neptune missile strike on a Russian airfield near Saky, Crimea by first launching drones to overwhelm Russian air defense systems.[22] The SBU sources reportedly stated that the missile strike inflicted unspecified serious damage to the airfield.[23] Ukrainian forces struck a Russian air defense system (likely a S-400 system near Yevpatoria, Crimea) in September and likely struck another S-400 system near Olenivka, Crimea in August.[24] Russian sources expressed concerns over Ukraine's ability to operate drones over Crimea during these strikes.[25] Successive Ukrainian strikes on Russian air defense infrastructure may be indicative of wider systemic issues with Russian air defenses in Crimea.

**Ukrainian strikes on Russian military assets in Crimea often generate Russian panic disproportionate to their kinetic effect and negatively impact Russian morale.** Ukrainian strikes on Russian rear areas consistently cause panic in the Russian information space and generate frustration and criticism about the Russian military command.[26] Ukrainian strikes on Crimea have also caused some Russian milbloggers to panic and erroneously perceive any Ukrainian actions targeting Crimea as conditions setting for imminent Ukrainian operations to liberate the peninsula.[27] Russian milbloggers notably expressed concern that Ukrainian forces were able to operate a drone and record footage of a strike on a Russian S-400 air defense system in Crimea about 120km behind the current frontline.[28] The Russian withdrawal of aviation elements and other military equipment from the Chornobaivka base from May to September 2022 following the Western provision of HIMARS to Ukraine and the more recent withdrawal of some BSF surface elements from Crimea suggest that preemptive fears of Ukrainian strikes can compel Russian forces to withdraw military assets further into the rear.[29] Several Russian milbloggers accused other milbloggers of spreading panic by publishing images purportedly showing the aftermath of Ukrainian strikes in Crimea in late July 2023.[30] Crimean occupation head Sergey Aksyonov announced on August 14 that Crimean occupation officials will propose amendments at a federal level to increase the liability for the spread of photos and videos showing the location and operation of Russian air defense systems, other systems, and military and strategic assets, indicating increased concern over Ukrainian strike capabilities.[31]

**A sustained and expanded Ukrainian strike campaign against Russian military targets in Crimea would likely degrade Russian efforts to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in southern Ukraine.** Ukrainian strikes against Russian military infrastructure in occupied southern Ukraine often cause Russian occupation officials to temporarily suspend transit, disrupting key Russian ground lines of communications (GLOCs) connecting Crimea to occupied Kherson Oblast for periods from a few hours to a few months.[32] Disruptions to Russia's southern GLOCs have created severe logistics delays and bottlenecks, as the only routes to or from Crimea to occupied Kherson Oblast or Russia are a limited set of bridges. Suppressing or destroying Russian air defense capabilities in southern Ukraine would increase the vulnerability of these GLOCs to Russian ground operations in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts. Sustained missile strikes on Russian offensive air capabilities would likely strain Russian aviation attempting to conduct strikes on Ukraine

by increasing their flight time, thereby decreasing the loitering time for Russian aviation to conduct strikes on Ukraine.

Sustained long-range strikes against Russian military targets in Crimea could additionally force the Russian military to move military assets and command centers farther away from the frontline, disrupting command and control. Russian milbloggers acknowledged that Western-provided HIMARS forced the Russian military to establish and execute a withdrawal plan from the Russian military base at the Kherson International Airport Chornobaivka (1km northwest of Kherson City) that concluded in September 2022.[33] ISW has also observed reports that Russian forces have moved command headquarters out of range of some Ukrainian platforms in an attempt to protect command centers from HIMARS and other long-range missile strikes after summer 2022.[34] A sustained and successful Ukrainian strike campaign against Crimea could likely achieve similar effects.

**Western provision of long-range missiles to Ukraine would amplify this ongoing, essential, and timely campaign to weaken Russia’s ability to defend southern Ukraine.**

No single Western-provided system will provide Ukraine with a decisive advantage or directly enable Ukrainian victory, and this report does not assert that ATACMS or other systems would provide Ukraine with a silver bullet.[35] However, Ukraine is demonstrably degrading Russian forces and logistics in Crimea, and the Western provision of long-range missiles would enable further strikes on the Russian rear. Four unnamed US government officials told *NBC News* in an article published on September 22 that US President Joe Biden told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that the US would provide Ukraine with “a small number of long-range missiles.”[36] Several unnamed people familiar with ongoing deliberations on ATACMS told the *Washington Post* that the Biden administration plans to provide Ukraine with a version of ATACMS armed with cluster munitions rather than a single (unitary) warhead.[37] Ukraine’s use of precision fires enables ongoing counteroffensive operations against occupied Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts and is not focused solely on a hypothetical future ground attack into Crimea itself - and Ukraine’s need for ATACMS and similar systems is therefore a timely requirement to support ongoing Ukrainian operations.

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