

Ukraine's Sustained Counteroffensive: Denying Russia's Prolongation of the War

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The West risks handing the Kremlin another opportunity to prolong its war in Ukraine if it fails to resource Ukraine's sustained counteroffensive. Delays and fragmented aid are exactly what allowed Russia to regroup prior to the Ukrainian counteroffensive. The West must not wait on the results of the current phase of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, and, instead, help Ukraine maintain its momentum to prevent Russia from rebuilding its military strength and prolonging the war.

The Western discussion of the prospects and timeline of Ukraine's counteroffensive is skewed by a Western desire to see quick wins and Russia's efforts to portray Ukraine's counteroffensive as a failing undertaking. The discussion of Ukraine's counteroffensive should recognize the following realities, however.

Ukraine, with Western support, has achieved substantial military results over the past 17 months. Ukraine prevented the Kremlin from achieving its initial objectives in this war to invade and conquer Ukraine in a matter of days. Ukraine has reversed many of Russia's gains, liberated about 75,000 square km of its territory, and prevented Russia from establishing control even over Donbas – despite Russia occupying much of the region for the past eight years. Ukraine was able to seize the initiative on the battlefield twice, in the summer of 2022 and in the spring of 2023.

Ukraine's ongoing counteroffensive cannot be expected to be fast and easy; it is inherently hard for several reasons:

- Russia had time to regroup and prepare for the inevitable Ukrainian counteroffensive, and Ukrainian forces now face prepared defensive Russian positions, including massive mine fields and layered field fortifications, and partially reconstituted Russian forces.[1]
- Ukraine is attempting combined arms operations without air superiority and with limited enablers for maneuvering, such as air defenses – an extraordinarily challenging undertaking. Ukraine's counteroffensive forces additionally had limited time to prepare for a major offensive.[2]
- Ukraine, unlike Russia, is optimizing its operations to preserve its own forces at the cost of slower advances.[3]

Ukrainian forces are nevertheless advancing and adapting. ISW assessed that **Ukraine has liberated about two-thirds of the same amount of territory in five weeks that Russian forces captured in over six months.**[4] Ukrainian forces adapted their tactics after initial setbacks and are increasingly successfully using small infantry assaults backed by precision fires to make inroads against Russian defenses. The large-scale mechanized breaches that NATO trained Ukraine's counteroffensive brigades to execute are incredibly difficult and are not the only option available to Ukrainian forces, who are not failing simply because they are using different approaches.

Ukrainian strikes continue to degrade key Russian ground lines of communications.[5] Russian forces are concerned about Ukrainian advances in several areas, including in Bakhmut.[6]

Ukrainian forces will continue to liberate Ukraine's territory and people if properly supported by the West. Ukraine has yet to commit the main body of its forces to counteroffensive operations and launch its main effort. The Kremlin, while it has regrouped its forces and is explicitly intending to adapt for a prolonged war, is still pursuing half-measures to regenerate its forces and mobilize Russia's defense industrial base.[7] Russia's localized counterattacks are unlikely to result in more than tactical gains.[8] These factors imply a continued window of opportunity for Ukraine, but this window cannot be taken for granted.

Enabling Ukraine to liberate its people and territory remains an essential requirement for preserving Ukraine's sovereignty and securing long term US interests, including preventing future Russian attacks on Ukraine that will draw the US and Europe into the same problem but under worse conditions.[9]

The West must learn a key lesson from last year and invest proactively in sustaining Ukraine's initiative to deny Russia the time to reconstitute. Ukraine conducted two successful counteroffensive operations in the fall of 2022. However, Ukraine was not able to exploit Russian battlefield setbacks in December-January through another counteroffensive operation, in part due to Western support lagging behind Ukraine's battlefield needs.[10]

The Ukrainian counteroffensive would have had a chance to continue had **the West planned to resource successive phases of the Ukrainian counteroffensive from the time that the initial Russian offensive culminated in July 2022.**[11]

A breather on the battlefield allowed Russia to stabilize its defensive lines, add weight to its offensive in Bakhmut, and prepare additional offensive operations in Luhansk Oblast.[12] It granted the Kremlin opportunities to frame Ukraine as losing in the global information space.

It also allowed the Kremlin to normalize new narratives within Russia's nationalist information space, which otherwise had been experiencing significant shocks after repeated Russian setbacks on the battlefield in 2022.[13]

The West should learn from the consequences of not beginning to fully resource Ukraine to conduct consecutive counteroffensive operations as soon as the initial Russian offensive culminated in July 2022 and proactively resource subsequent Ukrainian operations to incorporate additional **advanced capabilities** (jets, long-range firepower) and, equally critically help Ukraine regenerate its forces and further train to execute **combined arms at scale.** The West should also focus on enabling Ukraine to do what works in this operational environment, not try to enable Ukraine to do what the West thinks it would do.

Ukraine's sustained initiative, moreover, is an opportunity to exploit a Kremlin weakness. The Kremlin's limited ability to rapidly pivot after consecutive setbacks is a known vulnerability – one that the West must help Ukraine exploit to secure the most advantageous position possible. Ukraine's sustained initiative will likely have compounding effects on the Kremlin's ability to sustain the war.

Russia almost always adapts in the kinetic and information space if given time. The Kremlin is actively investing in force regeneration and efforts to revamp its defense industrial base – efforts that may have limited results now but significant effects over time.[14]

Rapid pivots are not the Kremlin's forte, however. Had Ukrainian counteroffensive operations continued in Dec 2022-Jan 2023, Russian forces would not have been able to stabilize the lines as effectively and **likely would have been expelled from more Ukrainian territory.**

It is additionally unclear how well the Kremlin would have been able to control the information space during continued Ukrainian offensives. Consecutive battlefield setbacks resulted in shockwaves in the Russian nationalist space – **Putin's key constituencies he relies on to sustain the war and his regime** – and accelerated the chain of events that led to Prigozhin's rebellion.[15]

Sustained Ukrainian operations on the battlefield that continuously – even if gradually – drive Russian forces out of Ukraine, will likely have compounding effects on Putin's ability to sustain the war. It will likely prevent Russia from meaningfully reconstituting the forces necessary to hold its occupied territory and from adjusting domestic narratives to explain the growing gap between Putin's goals and means in this war – especially as Putin's ability to control the domestic narrative is increasingly challenged.

The West also must resist Russian traps. The better this strategy works (the more the West can help Ukraine sustain battlefield momentum), the likelier the Kremlin is to leverage an illusion of peace talk prospects to manipulate Western decision-making to slow military support for Ukraine.

Momentum is the key dimension of capability in this war. Maintaining the Ukrainian initiative will likely result in compounding damage to Russia's ability to sustain the war. Conversely, any breather for Russia on the battlefield will present an opportunity for the Kremlin to solidify gains and reconstitute Russian forces for future attacks.

[1] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-16-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-9-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-21-2023>

[2] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-10-2023>

[3] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-9-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-4-2023>

[4] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-10-2023>

[5] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-17-2023>

[6] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-11-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-10-2023>

[7] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-5-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-14-2023>

[8] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-18-2023>

[9] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/reframing-us-policy-debate-%E2%80%98long-war%E2%80%99-ukraine>

[10] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-29-2023>

[11] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/kremlin%E2%80%99s-pyrrhic-victory-bakhmut-retrospective-battle-bakhmut>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-28>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-24>

[12] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/kremlin%E2%80%99s-pyrrhic-victory-bakhmut-retrospective-battle-bakhmut>

[13] <https://isw.pub/RusCampaignSept10>; <https://isw.pub/RusCampaignSept9>; <https://isw.pub/RusCampaignSept8>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-22-2023>

[14] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-11-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-18-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-2-2023> <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-10-2023> <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-2-2023>

[15] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/putin-track-disappoint-multiple-competing-factions-russia>; <https://isw.pub/RusCampaignSept10>; <https://isw.pub/RusCampaignSept9>; <https://isw.pub/RusCampaignSept8>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-22-2023>