

UKRANIAN KURSK OFFENSIVE: A FAILED GAMBLE

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Introduction

On 06 Aug 2024, Ukraine launched an offensive into the thinly defended Kursk region of Russia. For many Western analysts it seemed to be the boldest military move in the war against Russia. With quick, aggressive pushes into Russian-held territory, the incursion was meant to challenge the idea of Russian military invincibility and shift the balance of power on several fronts.

CNN even described it as a personal embarrassment for Putin, while some think tanks considered it a major error in judgment on Russia's part and one called it “A masterpiece of operational and strategic genius”.¹

A counter offensive is undertaken by a force previously on the defensive which launches an attack against the enemy with the primary aim of disrupting their offensive by forcing them to divert attention, troops and resources. The ultimate goal is to shift the momentum of the battle from the attacking to the defending force. If executed well, this can force the attacker to abandon their offensive or even retreat.

theoretically appealing, the key lies in its implementation in terms of area chosen for the offensive, force level of troops allocated and the ability to capitalise on success. While at the same time ensuring that this diversion of resources does not impact the integrity of one's own defences.

In this case, Ukraine was facing relentless pressure in the Donbas region, where Russian forces had made slow but steady progress. Although the Ukrainian Armed Forces were inflicting heavy costs on the Russians, they were unable to halt their advance.

Ukrainian forces met with initial success and at the height of the offensive, reportedly controlled 1,300 square kilometers of territory. Though, some independent sources reported closer to 1,100 square kilometers of Russian territory. But now they are clinging to barely 30 square miles along the Russia-Ukraine border and have pulled almost entirely out of the Kursk region of Russia, ending an offensive that had stunned Russia with its speed and audacity.²

Once encircled, Ukrainian soldiers described the retreat as organised in places and chaotic in others, while Russian forces stormed through their lines and forced them back to a sliver of land along the border. There is no doubt that the end of the battle is visible.³

How much Russian territory Ukraine still controls in Kursk cannot be confirmed, as reports indicate ongoing fierce fighting. But the fighting near the border is now less about holding Russian land, and more about trying to prevent Russian forces from pouring into the Sumy region of Ukraine and opening a new front in the war.⁴

The Offensive

The success of the first offensive gave Ukraine a much-needed morale boost and a symbolic victory, as it demonstrated the country's ability to challenge Russian forces on their own soil, undermining Moscow's carefully curated image of military dominance.⁵

As Ukrainian forces continued their push in the second offensive, it became apparent that, despite its symbolic importance, the Kursk region offers limited economic and strategic value. This offensive in fact underscored the complex challenges Ukraine faces: defending its sovereignty while balancing limited resources, international support, and the heavy psychological toll of war. As events unfolded, it became increasingly clear that the offensive had failed to meet its objectives.⁶

The Kursk offensive reveals several critical challenges that complicate Ukraine's efforts and raise questions about the effectiveness of its strategy. These challenges span operational, economic, diplomatic, psychological, and political dimensions, highlighting the complexities of sustaining a high-stakes war against a well-resourced adversary.⁷

Unfolding Events

Throughout history, military doctrine has consistently emphasised the importance of offensive action, even in the face of retreat. The Germans in both World Wars, ingrained the need to attack at every opportunity. However, this approach didn't always yield success. For instance, the Battle of Kursk in 1943 and the Battle of the Bulge in 1944 stand as prominent examples where the tactical doctrine of offensive action ultimately failed. In both cases, despite initially advantageous positions, the counteroffensive was either repelled or failed to achieve its objectives, resulting in heavy casualties and strategic setbacks.⁸

In hindsight a vulnerable Kursk region helped lure the Ukrainian forces into attacking it. Once Ukraine was committed to the attack, Russia had various options, divert troops to evict the incursion by either targeting the lines of replenishment or push them back from the head. The other option was to contain the incursion and attack elsewhere forcing Ukraine to pull out troops from the gains made.

While the options for Ukraine ranged from building up on the success and going deeper into Russian territory, consolidating at positions held or falling back to a strong defensive line. The Ukrainians hoped to bait Russian reinforcements into the Kursk salient, thus, relieving pressure on their Southern front. But Moscow chose not to take the

bait. Instead a new element was introduced, as Russia inducted North Korean troops to contain the incursion and kept up the pressure on in Eastern Ukraine.⁹

While the Ukrainians did correctly identify a weakly defended area in the Russian lines and launched an attack with 15,000 troops backed by armour and artillery, they failed to capitalise on it decisively.

The Russian forces were not as overstretched as they had hoped, and their lines remained relatively intact despite the initial breach. Moreover, Russia's ability to rapidly reinforce the area with artillery and air support ultimately overwhelmed the Ukrainian forces.

Thereafter, once the Ukrainians had reached their culmination point the Russians struck back. By Oct 2024, Russian forces had steadily regained almost 60 per cent of the territory that had been lost to Ukraine during the offensive.

By mid-February, Russian forces had advanced to within five miles of Ukraine's main resupply routes into Sudzha, allowing them to target the roads with swarms of drones — many of which were tethered to ultrathin fiber optic cables and, therefore, immune to jamming. Russian drones were also hitting pre-placed explosives to destroy bridges in Kursk, to try to make it harder for Ukrainian troops to retreat.¹⁰ Russian warplanes also attacked bridges, in one case dropping a 6,000-pound guided bomb to cut off one major artery.

On 08 Mar, Russian troops executed Operation Python where in an unusual manner they made a breakthrough, sneaking behind Ukrainian lines by walking for miles through a disused gas pipeline to stage a surprise attack at Sudzha. The Russian media has cast the operation as a heroic feat, while Ukrainian sources called it a risky move that they claimed had led to many deaths caused by residual methane in the pipeline.¹¹

The timing was significant as the Trump administration had announced the suspension of military aid and intelligence sharing when Ukraine's hold in Kursk was already in danger. The sudden loss of American intelligence for precise targeting compounded the difficulties, without it, the American-made multiple-rocket launchers known as HIMARS fell silent. Expensive missiles cannot to be fired at the wrong targets.

While the exact number of Russian troops involved and the success of the attack was impossible to independently confirm, "It caused enough confusion and havoc behind Ukrainian lines that it likely triggered them to start withdrawing".

While Kyiv had hoped to use its control over Russian land as leverage in any negotiation to end the war, now the Russians used the Ukrainian retreat in strengthening their hand in talks with the Trump administration about the ceasefire.

Why the Tide Turned

The reversal of Ukraine's fortunes in Kursk did not come down to any one factor. Russian forces pounded Ukraine's supply lines. North Korean troops brought in, improved their combat capabilities and at a crucial moment, US support including intelligence sharing was put on hold.¹²

It was now not Russia but Ukraine that was overstretched. The Russian forces enjoyed a significant advantage, with superiority in artillery, an advantage in drones, and comparable numbers in infantry.

Ukraine had employed some of its most experienced Brigades in the Kursk operation, but months of unrelenting assaults by Russian forces and the North Korean troops were taking a growing toll. While the North Korean troops had been pulled out from the battlefield in January to regroup, they returned to the fight in early February. And Ukrainian soldiers said their combat skills had improved.

The failure of the Kursk offensive highlights the timeless nature of strategic principles in warfare. A critical component is the availability of reserves to exploit successes. Unfortunately, in Kursk, the Ukrainians lacked reserves. Instead of reversing the tide, their positions weakened in the South and they began to yield territory at a pace not seen since the early stages of the war.

Another issue with the Kursk operations was the significant diversion of Ukrainian resources to support the campaign. Consequently, this left key areas in Eastern Ukraine, particularly the Donbas, underdefended. As a result, Russian forces seized the opportunity to intensify their operations in the East which was more vulnerable.¹³

The inability to disrupt Russia's offensives in the Donbas calls into question the effectiveness of Kursk as an operation. As the Kursk offensive inadvertently provided Russia with an opportunity to consolidate its gains in the East, further entrenching its control over a region critical to Ukraine's economic recovery and far more significant in terms of leverage at the negotiating table.

The inauguration of President Trump in January also turned the tide as he had made clear his intentions of ending the conflict. It was then absolutely clear to President Putin, that retaking Kursk was essential prior to the negotiations.

Conclusion

The Kursk operation is seen by some analysts as an unnecessary gamble, stretching Ukraine's troops and leading to heavy casualties at a time when they were already struggling to defend a long front line in their own country. But it provided a much-needed morale boost to Ukraine, which had sought to show it could bring the war home to Russia and had hoped the territory it occupied there would serve as leverage in any cease-fire negotiations.

The Ukrainian experience in Kursk serves as a reminder that, no matter the scale of ambition, success in warfare requires careful consideration of the battlefield realities, and, in this case, the miscalculations made by Ukraine hastened the erosion of their earlier momentum.

The offensives expose the harsh reality of this war: Ukraine is fighting on multiple fronts with limited resources, and every decision has consequences. The challenge of balancing aggressive tactics with the need to defend key territories is the essence in the art of war.

The Russian strategy focused on trading space for time in Kursk. Instead of a decision to defend Kursk at all costs, while continuing its steady attrition of the Ukrainian forces in the Donbas. They were successful in baiting the enemy into overextending, and thereafter exploited their vulnerability at the right moment.

In retrospect, the Kursk offensive may have been an audacious attempt to shift the momentum of the war, but it ultimately lacked the strategic depth and resources needed for success. Instead of achieving the desired diversion or shifting the momentum, it only accelerated Ukraine's struggles, leading to further territorial losses and a weakened position on the battlefield.

The resources committed to Kursk should have been better used elsewhere, in hindsight it seems to have been a failed gamble.

Endnotes

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