

The Complexities for Ukraine Compound with Pokrovsk Now in Russia's Sights

Introduction

On 10 Sep, there were reports that Russia had captured the village of Novohrodivka, just 10 km from Pokrovsk which is a key transportation hub sitting at the crossroads of major road and rail networks vital for the supply and reinforcement of Ukrainian positions throughout the eastern front.

Apparently, the city is now a shadow of its previous self. A substation has been hit, leaving half the city without power and water supplies have also been disrupted. Just two months ago, 48,000 people were still living here. Now half of them have left. The bustling downtown with shops and supermarkets is eerily quiet. Banks, supermarkets and most cafes are closed. The hospital has been evacuated. Outside the city, excavators are digging trenches in the fields.

If Pokrovsk falls, then Russian forces will be able to cut off one of the main supply routes in the region. This may force Ukraine to retreat from Chasiv Yar and the front line will move closer to Kramatorsk.

For Ukraine, this would effectively mean the loss of a major portion of the Donetsk region, which Russia has fought to capture since the beginning of their invasion.

The Ongoing Battle

Oleksandr Syrskyi, Ukraine's Commander-in-Chief, has stated that the army has managed to stop the Russian advance towards Pokrovsk. Meanwhile, a Battalion Commander of the 110th Brigade has been quoted saying that the front line on the northern flank of Russia's assault on Pokrovsk had indeed been stabilised.

However, Russian attacks are mostly focused on the southern flank and battles are continuing. One of the areas on that flank that Russians are trying to seize is Selydove, a small-town Southeast of Pokrovsk, where there are reports of an intense battle near the railway bridge.

Kursk – A Gamble

On 06 Aug, Ukraine launched a bold offensive into Russia's Kursk region. Since then, Ukraine has captured a significant tract of Russian territory. Although Russia had two defensive lines established in Kursk, they were lightly manned by border guards and conscripts, backed by an Akhmat unit which is a Chechen unit.^[1]

Effectively combining armour, mechanised infantry, and artillery, Ukrainian forces quickly bypassed or encircled the Russian defenders. But, six weeks into the attack, while the Ukrainian forces are holding territory and continuing offensive operations, they are unsure about what to make of this tactical success.

Their offensive has yet to draw significant Russian forces from Ukraine's eastern regions, and it remains unclear how Ukraine's intends to translate this into strategic gains. The offensive offers opportunities, but also carries considerable risks and costs. Reinforcing the offensive requires additional troops which means thinning out defences opposite the

Russians in eastern Ukraine. There is also the danger of being cut off if they extend themselves too far without consolidation.[2]

There is another issue – these are some of Ukraine’s better and most experienced troops, drawn from Ukraine’s elite Air Assault Forces. Some have been pulled off the frontlines in Donetsk and Kharkiv, where they were fighting against a Russian advance, whereas others would have served as an important reserve to stem Russian momentum.[3]

But by thinning out resources from defenses, Ukraine was hoping that the 750-mile front won’t collapse. Most importantly the benefits from its operations in Kursk would outweigh the costs sustained elsewhere.[4]

Russia, however, retains an advantage in [troops](#), equipment, and ammunition, and they have kept advancing in the weeks since Ukraine pushed into Kursk. Recently, the pace of that advance has accelerated, and Ukraine’s position looks increasingly precarious along parts of the front, especially in front of Pokrovsk. The fact is that Ukraine’s incursion into Kursk has failed to force Russia to divert its troops from eastern Ukraine. Conversely for Russia, the Kursk incursion has drawn Ukrainian resources away from more critical fronts and by maintaining their focus on Donetsk, Russian forces have been able to press their advantage by potentially exploiting Ukrainian vulnerabilities.[5]

Ukraine’s Concerns

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has complained that it has become increasingly difficult to use Storm Shadow missiles against Russian targets in occupied Ukraine because of a lack of supplies and reduced cooperation from the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and France.

He said that [Ukraine](#) needed to be able to threaten targets inside Russia’s internationally recognised borders with Anglo-French Storm Shadow/Scalp cruise missiles and the US Atacms ballistic missiles, which both have a range of at least 190 miles. He further stated that it was becoming difficult, in practice, to even strike Russian targets on occupied Ukrainian territory, which has been permitted by weapon-supplying countries for months.

Ukraine has argued that it is locked in an unfair fight in which Russia can bomb military and civilian sites anywhere inside Ukraine, while its own western allies do not allow it to strike back at airfields, military bases and significant infrastructure targets. However, the reluctance to loosen restrictions on the use of the missiles is that Russia could consider this move escalatory.[6]

Ukraine feels it has used other weapons, such as F-16’s Leopard and Chieftain tanks, without triggering a wider crisis. A group of Republicans have now written to the US President Joe Biden, urging him to [lift the restrictions](#) on the use of the US-provided long-range weapons systems and allow Kyiv to strike targets deep inside Russia. There were also reports that this issue may have come up for discussion when President Biden and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer met on 12 Sep in Washington. But what needs to be deliberated is how these longer-range strikes would factor into Ukraine’s broader battlefield strategy.[7]

However, building up the case to remove sanctions, the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said that Russia has received an unspecified number of SRBM shipments from Iran and warned that Russian forces will likely use them on the battlefield “within weeks”.

As per a UK report, 200 Fateh-360 SRBMs were delivered to Russia via a Caspian Sea Port on 04 Sep. The US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell also told Politico on 10 Sep that China is giving Russia's defense industry "very substantial" support in exchange for secretive Russian military technologies. He emphasised that China is not just supplying dual-use products to Russia but is instead engaged in a "substantial effort....to help sustain, build, and diversify elements of the Russian war machine".[\[8\]](#)

Western Concerns

The West initially saw Ukraine's role in a positive light. First, it stopped the Russian offensive in Kyiv. Next, it [broke](#) Russian forces around Kharkiv and [retook](#) Kherson. However, the counteroffensive with western weapons in the spring of 2023, with the aim of pushing Russia back to its borders and finishing the war, failed.

Ukraine was now in a circular trap it needed to demonstrate significant battlefield results to get more military aid. But it needed western equipment for it to achieve results without violating the limitations on their use.

When the 2023 counteroffensive petered out, Ukraine not only lost troops and equipment, but it also lost a compelling argument on how it intended to defeat Russia.

Now with the loss of one of the six F-16s following the Commander of the Ukrainian Air Force, Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk was dismissed.[\[9\]](#) There are also reports that Ukraine has lost 37 Leopard, five M1 Abrams and one Challenger tank. Hence, there is a doubt regarding the lack of training and Ukraine's ability to handle complex western equipment in a challenging operating environment.

At the same time, the weaknesses in these systems are coming to the fore. In the case of the Challenger 2, once it got hit by a Russian anti-tank missile, the crew bailed out. But the charges for the tank's main gun ammunition apparently went off despite being stored in a water-filled container and the resulting explosion destroyed the tank.

There is also another issue. The arms and equipment given to [Ukraine](#) were from those in the inventory. Now, the cost of replacement for example in UK is considerably more as the cost of replacing missiles, artillery and other munitions significantly exceeds their GBP 171.5 mn value on the government's books because of current prices.

Further, UK weapon deliveries are slowing because surplus stockpiles are nearly exhausted. The British Army also [risks being "temporarily weaker"](#) till replacements are carried out.

The German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, facing political discontent over the government's support including money and weapons for Ukraine after populist parties that oppose arming Kyiv, did well in state elections and has said, "I believe that now is the moment when we must discuss how we get out of this war situation faster than the current impression is". He also called for a peace conference to be attended by Moscow which seems to be a sign of wavering support for Ukraine.[\[10\]](#)

Conclusion

If Russian forces capture Pokrovsk, they would effectively cut off these critical supply lines, isolating Ukrainian units defending other key areas in Donetsk. There are also chances that its loss could have a cascading effect, leading to a broader collapse of

Ukrainian defenses in the Donetsk region. Hence, for Russia, focus on Pokrovsk reflects a broader strategy aimed at consolidating gains in eastern Ukraine.

Russia not evicting the Ukrainian incursion into Kursk, hence, should not be viewed as a weakness but could be a deliberate move to achieve its bigger goal in eastern Ukraine.

With the growing challenges around the world which are competing for resources and attention, Ukraine needs to have clarity as to how it can prosecute a war bound by the existing 'terms of reference'.

No wonder, the former US President Donald Trump, while speaking at a Presidential Debate on 10 Sep, sidestepped a direct question on whether he wanted Ukraine to win in its war against Russia, and said, "I want the war to stop".

Endnotes

[1] Lee, Michael Kofman and Rob. "Ukraine's Gamble: The Risks and Rewards of the Offensive Into Russia's Kursk Region." Foreign Affairs, September 10, 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/ukraines-gamble>.

[2] ibid

[3] ibid

[4] Marc Santora and Anton Troianovski, Putin Drives Home a Perilous Point: Ukraine's East Is Russia's Main Goal, New York Times, 05 September 2024 <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/05/world/europe/russia-ukraine-putin-kursk.html>

[5] Jazeera, Al. "Ukraine failed to slow Russia's Donbas advance with Kursk incursion: Putin." Al Jazeera, September 5, 2024.

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[6] Sabbagh, Dan. "Zelenskiy claims support waning for strikes against Russian occupiers." The Guardian, September 6, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/sep/06/zelenskiy-calls-on-west-to-allow-missile-strikes-deep-inside-russia>.

[7] Kylie Atwood and Jennifer Hansler, Senior Republicans urge Biden to lift restrictions on Ukraine hitting targets deep inside Russia Kylie Atwood Jennifer Hansler, CNN, 11 September 2024

<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/10/politics/republicans-urge-biden-lift-restrictions-ukraine-targets-inside-russia/index.html>

[8] Institute for the Study of War. "Institute for the Study of War," n.d.

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-10-2024>.

[9] Ukraine's air force commander dismissed after F-16 crash, The Reuters, 31 August 2024,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/zelenskiy-dismisses-ukraines-air-force-commander-2024-08-30/>

[10] “German Chancellor says any future Ukraine peace conference must include Russia.” Euronews, September 8, 2024.

<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/09/09/german-chancellor-says-any-future-ukraine-peace-conference-must-include-russia>.

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