

The West Is Facing a Major Dilemma While Russia Prepares for Its Summer Offensive

Introduction

Russia has now started the early phases of its anticipated summer offensive with renewed attacks in the region of Kharkiv. Over the past few weeks, Russian troops crossed the Ukrainian border, occupying a number of villages. Though Ukraine has spent several months fortifying Kharkiv, the Russians seem to have compounded their advantages over the Ukrainian Army whom they now intend degrade though it seems unlikely that they will try and enter Kharkiv.

This summer, things are looking hot and expectedly President Zelenskyy is looking towards the West for assistance and more so for permission to cross certain red lines, namely permitting Ukraine to use Western arms against military sites in Russia, which were used to target Ukraine.

But at the same time while the West is ready to supply more weapons and sanction aid, there are now voices across the globe which are becoming increasingly audible pointing out at a grim reality, namely that Ukraine is unlikely to be in a position to reclaim lost territory and hence negotiation with Russia seems to be the only solution.

Russian Pressure Along an Extended Front Line

As per The Royal United Services Institute, the Russian forces attacking Ukraine have now increased to 5,10,000 troops. This means that Russia has established significant numerical superiority over the Ukrainian Armed Forces. However, the Russians have been conducting platoon and company attacks at a number of places, rather than brigade or divisional operations at few places, though they rarely, decisively overmatch Ukrainian defenders at any one location, but with a huge numerical superiority, they have now stretched the Ukrainian forces across the front line and are turning a limitation to an advantage.[\[1\]](#)

The front in Ukraine spans almost 1,200 km. Along Ukraine's northern border, near Chernihiv, Russian troops continually probe Ukrainian positions. Meanwhile, a large concentration of troops near Belgorod, is threatening to push towards Sumy or Kharkiv, and has made its presence felt with fire assaults.[\[2\]](#) The main focus of Russian efforts has been in Donbas, but in the south Russian troops have also been involved in skirmishes along the Zaporizhzhia front and have even conducted amphibious raids across the Dnipro River. The breadth of their attacks has fixed Ukrainian troops on the line of contact and forced Ukraine to spread out its artillery, expending munitions to break up successive Russian attacks.

In fact, Ukraine's defensive lines in places are thin to absent. At Vovchansk, less than 40 miles North-West of Kharkiv, "The first line of fortifications and mines just didn't exist", as per Denys Yaroslavsky a Ukrainian Commander.[\[3\]](#)

Having stretched the Ukrainians, the contours of the Russian summer offensive are now easier to discern. Russian forces are likely to pursue an offensive in Ukraine with the aim of stretching their forces across a wide frontline and maintaining pressure to attempt to weaken the Ukrainian defensive line.

The focus seems to be the Chasiv Yar area, where the prospects for an operationally significant advance exist, and the front West of Avdiivka, where Russian forces have been able to achieve tactically significant gains in recent weeks There will also be the push against Kharkiv forcing

Ukraine to commit troops to defend its second largest city. Given the size of the Russian forces in the area, these will draw in critical reserves. Russia will also apply pressure on the other end of the line, threatening Zaporizhzhia. To blunt these attacks, Ukraine will require the commitment of reserves which in turn will deplete its offensive capability.

Once Ukraine commits its reserves in these directions, the main effort will see the expansion of the Russian push in Donbas. This axis is already making slow but steady progress. The objective is clear, to cut Ukrainian supply lines connecting Kostiantynivka and Kramatorsk. The Russians hope that once Ukraine loses these roads that give the Ukrainian the advantage of interior lines of communication, they will be able to push north and south, dividing Ukrainian artillery on one axis or the other. Russia's aim will be to keep up the pressure and advance, albeit slowly along the front. [\[4\]](#)

Precision Strikes

Simultaneously, the persistence of Russia's long-range strike campaign means, that not only is the front being stretched laterally, but it is also being extended in its depth. Compounding the challenge for the Ukrainian military is the deterioration of its air defences. The depletion of Ukrainian tactical Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) systems has already allowed the Russian Aerospace Forces to deliver glide bombs against Ukrainian positions. Russia is using glide bombs, along with direct-attack munitions, in volume to overwhelm Ukrainian air defence. [\[5\]](#)

As the Russians push closer in, against a diminished air threat, the accuracy and therefore the lethality of these strikes will increase. Able to strike behind Ukrainian lines, the Russians are using them to bomb and force evictions from Ukrainian towns. More than 200 of them reportedly used in just a week to pound Ukraine's northern town of Vovchansk during Russia's current advance near Kharkiv.

Prior to the full-scale invasion, Russian forces had envisaged reconnaissance and strikes allowing their troops to accurately detect and destroy targets behind the front lines. This had earlier been curtailed by the Ukrainian air defences. Now, however, Ukraine is having to save its SAMs to deter Russian aircraft. The result is that Russian unmanned aerial vehicles are now seen far and wide over the front lines and are routinely flying over both Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia. [\[6\]](#)

As the SAM coverage shrinks, the Ukrainian military faces a trade-off. It can continue to group air defences around critical national infrastructure such as power stations, or it can move them forwards to protect the front. The persistence of Russia's long-range strike campaign means that not only is the front being stretched laterally, but it is also being extended in its depth.

Ukraine Feels Allies Need to Step Up Support

The quicker that both SAMs and artillery ammunition reach Ukraine, the more difficult it will be for the Russians to progress operations. At present, there is a direct correlation between the speed of supply from Ukraine's international partners of artillery ammunition and air defence interceptors, and the speed of deterioration at the front. If the Ukrainian front-line troops lack sufficient means to blunt Russian attacks, Russia will be able to force Ukraine to commit reserves and then exploit the axes where troops and equipment that have thinned out. In other words, so long as Ukraine lacks resources, Russia will begin to compound its advantages.

If the West is able to quickly replenish Ukrainian munitions stockpiles, help establish a robust training pipeline, and provide the necessary war waging equipment, then Russia's summer offensive can be slowed down and stopped.

In the medium term, however, turning the present dynamic around is up to Ukraine and cannot be resolved by its allies. Unless the Ukrainian Armed Forces expand in size they will continue to be overstretched. They need to not only replenish losses in their existing units, but also raise enough units to manage their rotations giving rest to troops who have been continually involved in combat. This will allow them to recreate reserves.[\[7\]](#)

The Advisor to the Ukrainian President's Office Mykhaylo Podolyak has stated that United States (US) provided military aid has started arriving on the frontline but, that it will take weeks for the gradual increase in US-provided military aid to reach 'Critical Volumes'.

The Western Dilemma

The question is, whether Ukraine should be allowed to use its allies' weapons to 'Neutralise' Russian military bases used to fire missiles into Ukraine. France's President, Emmanuel Macron, while discussing this issue said; "We should not allow them to touch other targets in Russia, and obviously civilian capacities".[\[8\]](#)

Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, appeared to back Ukraine on the matter as well as saying, he agreed with the French President as long as the Ukrainians respected the conditions of the weapons' supplier. However, Germany has refused to supply Taurus cruise missiles which are capable of powerful strikes on Russian positions inside Ukraine and deep into Russia.[\[9\]](#)

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, has also been quoted in the Economist stating that alliance members should let Ukraine strike deep into Russia with Western weapons. On 27 May the NATO Parliamentary Assembly adopted a declaration calling for NATO states to support Ukraine's 'International Right' to defend itself by lifting 'Some Restrictions' on Ukraine's use of Western weapons to strike Russian territory. But the White House has ruled out such a possibility for US-supplied weapons. "There's no change to our policy at this point. We don't encourage or enable the use of US-supplied weapons to strike inside Russia", said John Kirby, National Security Council spokesperson.[\[10\]](#)

At the same time President Vladimir Putin warned of 'Serious Consequences' if Russia is struck with Western weapons. The Kremlin also touched upon persisting differences in the West as per a statement by their spokesperson Dmitry Peskov to the Russian daily Izvestia, "We see that there is no consensus on this issue".

Conclusion

The outlook in Ukraine is bleak. Ukraine's capacity to defend itself depends largely upon decisions taken by its Western allies. The USD 61.0 bn package of military assistance approved by the US Congress last month after months of delays has yet to stabilize Ukraine's battlefield vulnerability, though it is hoped that it will correct the disparities, will provide Ukrainians a psychological boost and will give them the confidence that they have not been abandoned by their most important ally.

However, if Ukraine's allies do not replenish Ukrainian munitions stockpiles, help establish a robust training pipeline, and provide the requisite wherewithal in a faster time frame, then Russia's summer offensive will be difficult to blunt. The question of engaging targets on Russian

soil with Western supplied weapons is of course compounding the complexities of conflict. Hopes in the earlier years of fighting that Russia could be driven back have turned into a grim struggle to stop its forces advancing deeper into the country.

Unfortunately, in the war's third year, no end is in sight as both Russia and Ukraine keep fighting with the same goals.

End Notes

[1] Dr. Jack Watling, "In Ukraine, Russia is Beginning to Compound Advantages", Royal United Services Institute, 14 May 2024.

<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/ukraine-russia-beginning-compound-advantages>

[2] *ibid*

[3] Sabbagh, Dan, "How Russia has advanced in Kharkiv despite warnings attack was coming", The Guardian, 16 May 2024.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/16/ukraines-defences-thin-on-ground-as-russia-advances-on-kharkiv>

[4] Dr. Jack Watling, "In Ukraine, Russia is Beginning to Compound Advantages", Royal United Services Institute. 14 May 2024.

<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/ukraine-russia-beginning-compound-advantages>

[5] *ibid*

[6] *ibid*

[7] *ibid*

[8] Wallace, Rob, "NATO's spiralling commitments to Ukraine risk catastrophe | MR Online", MR Online, 31 May 2024.

<https://mronline.org/2024/05/31/natos-spiralling-commitments-to-ukraine-risk-catastrophe/>

[9] Murray, Warren. "Ukraine war briefing: Macron, Scholz agree Kyiv should use allies' weapons against launchers in Russia", The Guardian, May 29, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/29/ukraine-war-briefing-macron-scholz-agree-kyiv-should-use-allies-weapons-against-launchers-in-russia>

[10] The Economist, "NATO's boss wants to free Ukraine to strike hard inside Russia", 24 May 2024. <https://www.economist.com/europe/2024/05/24/natos-boss-wants-to-free-ukraine-to-strike-hard-inside-russia>

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