

## Ukraine's Offensive in Kursk: Will It Achieve Strategic Dividends

---

### Introduction

The bold Ukrainian ground that began on 06 Aug in the Southern Kursk region of Russia, is an operation that took everyone by surprise not only due to its audacity but also in the manner in which it was executed and in the progress it has made. Ukraine, as of date, is occupying a substantial piece of Russian territory, reportedly 1,150 sq km, which marks the first time that foreign troops have occupied Russian territory since World War II. Incidentally, this was the region that saw the largest tank battle at that time.

As per the latest reports, Ukraine has destroyed a strategically important bridge over the Seym River, which Russia feels has been destroyed using rockets provided by the United States (US), as Ukraine continues its incursion. Russian officials have also been quoted saying that the operation near the town of Glushkovo has cut off part of the local district. The surprise cross-border operation has also resulted in more than 1,20,000 people fleeing to safety.

The Ukrainian Armed Forces' invasion of Kursk Oblast, conceived, planned, and executed in utmost secrecy, has transformed the narrative of the war. Instead of the news about incremental Russian progress in a war of attrition in Eastern Ukraine, the Ukrainian Armed Forces decided to take the battle into the enemy's territory.

### Possible Intention

Having carried out a successful execution, Ukraine now has several options: it can try to hold on to the territory it has seized, it can advance deeper into Russia, retreat to more defensible positions inside Russia, or it can withdraw back into Ukraine having exploited a vulnerability. Each one of these options would have been wargamed and deliberated upon keeping Ukraine's military capabilities, Russian reactions, and the intent of the operation in mind.[\[1\]](#)

The best-case scenario for Ukraine is that its units dig in on a tactically advantageous defensive line, and Russia, while compelled to retake the lost ground, suffers inordinate losses in trying to push them back, thereby degrading its capabilities.

It is difficult to know, at this point, Ukraine's intent for this operation. Perhaps Ukraine aimed to draw in Russian ground troops away from the frontlines, thereby weakening their offensive. It would then seize upon this weakness to recapture some of its lost territory there.[\[2\]](#)

They would have also wanted to divert Russian artillery and other precision weapons and force multipliers northward, beyond the range of Ukraine's Sumy region. Another aim could be to capture Russian territory, which could be used to bargain for Ukrainian territory captured by the Russians once negotiations for a ceasefire begin. In fact, President Zelenskyy has called the captured territories an exchange fund, implying they could be swapped for Ukrainian regions occupied by Moscow. The aim could also include capturing prisoners in exchange for Ukrainian soldiers held in Russia. Politically, the purpose of the operation is to build leverage ahead of possible negotiations. There is a school of thought that in case Donald Trump wins the US presidency in November he is likely to force Ukraine to negotiate. The Ukrainian government, hence, wants to ensure that it has a sizeable chunk of Russian land for potential negotiations.[\[3\]](#)

The other intention could be targeting the Russian leadership particularly, President Putin, by exposing a fundamental weakness in their ability to protect Russian territory and citizens from foreign invasion.

### **Use of Western Weapons**

An issue that has come to the fore is how the incursion might reshape the political and military dynamics of the war, due to the implications for the US stance on the use of American-supplied weapons.

The stunning offensive has highlighted one of the riskiest dilemmas for the Western-backed defence of Ukraine as President Biden has consistently tried to empower Ukraine to push back Russia's invasion without risking an American escalation with Moscow.

While on the other hand, President Putin has always tried to portray the conflict as a war between Russia and the West. The Kursk intrusion has now raised the question for the US regarding how Ukraine can use American and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) weapons systems.[\[4\]](#)

According to a report in the Eurasian Times, the US is withholding authorisation to use Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) not because of worries about potential escalation but rather for strategic reasons tied to the limited availability of these long-range weapons. They want Ukraine to prioritise their use in Crimea over strikes in Kursk. This decision aims to maximise the impact of the limited number of ATACMS missiles available.[\[5\]](#)

As per a BBC report, while the White House, Pentagon and State Department will not officially confirm whether they are being used, it seems overwhelmingly clear that they are, given Ukraine's reliance on US and NATO weapons systems.[\[6\]](#)

Vladislav Seleznyov, a former spokesman for the Ukrainian Armed Forces, told Voice of America that US-provided High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMAR) rocket launchers had been critical to the advance. Pentagon spokesman Patrick Ryder has also said: "We assess that they're within the policy boundaries that we've set. Those policies haven't changed as it relates to in particular to use of US weapons".[\[7\]](#)

The Kursk Offensive has taken the Western dilemma into unexpected territory literally and figuratively. The ambiguity is, therefore, unlikely to clear.

### **Russian Options and Reactions**

However, as Ukraine moves further into Western Russian territory, Russian forces are making equal gains in Ukraine's East. On 16 Aug, Russian troops had captured Serhiivka, the latest in a string of towns claimed by Russian troops in recent weeks.

The latest advances have brought the Russians closer to the city of Pokrovsk, which lies northwest of the Russian-held Donetsk region and is a vital logistics hub that sits on a main road for supplies to Ukrainian troops along the eastern front.

Apart from advancing in Eastern Ukraine due to a weakness created as troops for the offensive would necessarily have to be pulled out of the area, Russia has the option of diverting its own troops to prevent further expansions and, thereafter, carrying out the eviction of Ukrainian troops.

The other option that could be exercised by Russia is to bring down sustained fire by precision weapons, long-range vectors, and air strikes on the Ukrainian troops that have entered Russian territory and, thereby, degrade and destroy them. This would be in conjunction with the Russian troops fighting the defensive battle.

It is also possible that the stretching of Ukrainian resources will increase opportunities for the Russians to find the seams in Ukraine's defences and make advances elsewhere, with President Putin being quite willing to absorb the losses presently.<sup>[8]</sup>

There is of course yet another option, and that is the use or threatened use of nuclear weapons targeting the Ukrainian offensive, which would be used on Russian soil and hence would have totally different implications vis-à-vis their being used on Ukrainian soil. This step of course would open up a whole range of ethical questions, and the implications would be grave and would have serious repercussions.

But this war has taught us that the philosophy of the use of nuclear weapons, which were first used to end World War II and then were used during the Cold War to prevent a war, nuclear deterrence has been turned on its head in the current conflict by Russia, which has used the threat of nuclear weapons to prosecute a war.<sup>[9]</sup> Hence, threatening the use of nuclear weapons on its own soil against an invasion may be viewed as being morally correct.

President Putin has previously threatened to use 'All available means' if Russia's territorial integrity is threatened. Conversely, is President Zelenskyy trying to prove that Putin's nuclear threats are only rhetoric?

## **Conclusion**

The immediate impact of Ukraine's incursion has brought a transformation in the morale of the Ukrainian public and in the narrative among its international partners.

There is, however, a limit to the depth of the Ukrainian offensive. It is well known that Ukraine was suffering from a shortage of troops to rotate and hold the line prior to its operation in Kursk. Now it has pulled together what was available as operational reserves and committed them to a new thrust line. What is important is how far this force can push before it overextends, meaning it will need to dig in soon if the Ukrainians are to hold the ground and avoid getting cut off and destroyed.

The question also remains whether the Kursk incursion will be seen as posing an intolerable threat to Russia and cause Russia to retaliate in a manner that may have serious consequences, or will this be seen as a point in the conflict that can force both sides towards negotiations, leading to some sort of agreement?

There is no doubt that Ukraine's audacity has created a strategic dilemma for Russia. What needs to be determined is the broader impact in the larger context of the Ukrainian War. The truth is that the outcomes and possibilities in war are not inevitable.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>[1]</sup> AP News. "Why Ukraine's swift push into Kursk shocked Russia | AP News," 16 Aug 2024.

<https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-kursk-incursion-putin-1178b99b32b476816db3a48ffa06b11a>.

[2] International New York Times. “Explained | What to know about Ukraine’s cross-border assault into Russia.” Deccan Herald, 14 Aug 2024.

<https://www.deccanherald.com/world/explained-what-to-know-about-ukraines-cross-border-assault-into-russia-3150176>.

[3] Watling, Jack. “Ukraine’s extraordinary incursion into Kursk has changed the narrative of the war – but is a high-risk strategy.” The Guardian, 18 Aug 2024.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/17/ukraine-offensive-russia-political-logic-but-high-risk-strategy>.

[4] Bateman, Tom. “Ukraine’s surprise advance into Russia a dilemma for Biden,” 15 Aug 2024.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cql365ld002o>.

[5] Dangwal, Ashish. “Ukraine’s “Foolish” Use Of ATACMS On Russia’s Kursk Displeases U.S.; Wants Kyiv To Focus On Crimea – CNN.” EURASIAN TIMES, 16 Aug 2024.

<https://www.eurasiantimes.com/ukraines-foolish-use-of-atacms-on-russias-kursk/>.

[6] Bateman, Tom. “Ukraine’s surprise advance into Russia a dilemma for Biden,” 15 Aug 2024.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cql365ld002o>.

[7] *ibid*

[8] Watling, Jack. “Ukraine’s extraordinary incursion into Kursk has changed the narrative of the war – but is a high-risk strategy.” The Guardian, 18 Aug 2024.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/17/ukraine-offensive-russia-political-logic-but-high-risk-strategy>.

[9] Psaropoulos, John T. “Ukraine begins strikes on Russian soil using US weapons.” Al Jazeera, 8 Jun 2024.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/7/ukraine-begins-strikes-on-russian-soil-using-us-weapons>.

**Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd)** is a Distinguished Fellow at the USI of India. Commissioned in 1981 into the 18 Cavalry, he has held various important command and Staff appointments including command of an Armoured Division.

**Article uploaded on 23-08-2024**

**Disclaimer :** The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisation that he/she belongs to or of the USI of India.