

Ukrainian Counter Offensive: The Momentum is Missing

There are various terms associated with fighting a defensive battle these range from reinforcement of a locality under attack, to counter attacking a position that has been captured, a counter offensive and a counter stroke. Each has its differences ranging from force levels employed, time frame in which it is carried out, objectives, aims and nuances of execution.

In the eighteen months since the conflict broke out, the Ukrainians have mostly been on the defensive, preventing Russian forces from seizing more territory. But with the help of billions of dollars' worth of Western military equipment Ukraine launched its counter offensive in June, attempting to expel the Russians from land they previously captured in the East and South of the country.

All news reports were focused on the successful launch of a Ukrainian counter offensive once the weather permitted with troops equipped with Western arsenal which is far superior to their Soviet origin equipment. However, equipment is only one part of the matrix, the quality and training of troops, their battle procedures, tactics and doctrines are yet another dimension which is essential to ensure the success of any operation. However, now it is increasingly clear that the futility of Ukraine's offensive, promoted relentlessly by the Western media as a turning point in the war, is being questioned.

Russia Strengthens Its Defensive Lines

In preparation for Ukraine's counter offensive, Russia spent months fortifying the almost 1,100 km frontline across the territory it occupied. Satellite images revealed a multi-layered Russian network of anti-tank ditches, mazes of trenches, concrete 'dragon's teeth' barricades, steel 'hedgehog' obstacles, spools of razor wire and minefields. Russia's proficiency in defending the occupied territory through a phalanx of massive obstacle system which is not easy to breach poses its own challenges to an attacker.

Russia's most heavily fortified frontline area is in Southern Zaporizhzhia Province, where Ukraine was expected to try to break through and sever the 'land bridge' connecting Russian territory with occupied Crimea.^[1]

Ukrainian Progress of Operations

Before the start of the counter offensive, Ukrainian forces engaged in 'shaping operations' to weaken logistics and supply chains deep inside the Russia occupied territories. According to some reports, Ukrainian forces had built up an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 soldiers for the counter offensive, organized into twelve brigades. Three were trained in Ukraine, and the other nine were trained and equipped by the US.

Beginning in May 2023, Ukrainian forces engaged in 'localised' counterattacks on the flanks of Bakhmut, as part of the larger battle in the city. On 12 May Ukrainian forces forced the Russians out of the Southern bank of the Berkhivska Reservoir, about four kms North West of Bakhmut, and claimed gains of 20 sq kms. On 05 June, it was reported that they had retaken part of Berkhivka, North of Bakhmut. ^[2]

On 11 June, Ukrainian forces breached Russia's first line of less fortified defences and liberated three villages in the South of the Donetsk region. Over the next two days, four further villages were liberated. On 18 June, Ukraine struck a Russian Ammunition Depot deep behind the

frontline in Southern Kherson. By 30 June, the Ukrainian counter offensive had made only modest gains. But Ukraine's Defence Minister claimed this was merely a 'preview' of a much bigger push to come. [3]

On 04 July several drones were shot down in the suburbs of Moscow. On 17 July there was a Ukrainian attack on the Crimea bridge, which connects the occupied peninsula to Russia. The bridge partially collapsed killing two people. On 30 July and 01 August drone strikes targeted skyscrapers in Moscow's main business district.

On 04 August Ukraine's Navy carried out sea drone strikes outside the port of Novorossiysk, a major Naval Base and oil-exporting terminal located East of Crimea. [4]

Ukraine claimed its troops had retaken the village of Staromaiorske in the Donetsk region. Around Bakhmut, in the East, where there has been intense fighting, Ukraine has also stated that it has regained some small areas and it has also made small gains in the Zaporizhzhia region in the South, a key area where Ukraine aimed at making a decisive difference.

On 16 August, Ukrainian Marines advanced on the South Eastern frontlines, towards the key port city of Mariupol, with the recapture of the village of Urozhaine appearing to have been partially aided by the Ukrainian use of controversial cluster munitions. [5]

This represented progress for a gruelling counteroffensive in which the gains have been measured in meters rather than miles. Ukrainian troops have faced stiffer than expected resistance and there has been an unavoidable slowdown of tempo due to the heavily fortified Russian defensive lines, reinforced by vast networks of trenches and landmines.

To put it across simply, the Ukrainians attempted to advance on three axes and then develop a main one after the Russians had side stepped their reserves to counter them and these in turn had been fixed by the Ukrainian offensive. In that process a weakness in the Russian defensive line would have been created which could have been exploited. But as Molke the Elder said; "No plan survives contact". The Russians remained strong enough to hold the offensive on all thrust lines without permitting a major breakthrough.

With reserves being committed and depleted at the initial stages, the momentum seems missing and unless Ukrainian forces are able to generate substantial tempo the gains will continue to remain incremental. Currently it appears that its massive efforts are yielding only negligible results.

Dilemmas Posed

The first dilemma that was faced by the Ukrainian Army was whether to strengthen a defensive line and fill up gaps or to commit fresh but experienced troops into a counter offensive. The next issue was the aim of such an offensive ranging from pushing back all Russian intrusions or making a dash for the sea and cutting off Crimea.

It was thought that a Ukrainian push through the swathe of Russian-held territory to the Sea of Azov would disrupt Russia's supply routes and cut off their forces in Russian-annexed Crimea and further West.[6]

Ukraine launched the counteroffensive in early June hoping to replicate its stunning success in last year's push through the Kharkiv region. However, the counter offensive push has, thus far,

failed to gain the same momentum as their counter attacks last autumn, despite previously high expectations.[\[7\]](#)

In order to break through the Russian defences Ukraine will no doubt incur increasing casualties and thereafter they will need fresh troops to exploit the success. Given the attrition they have undergone over the past eighteen months, this may not be possible.

In fact, with little training on the new equipment it was unrealistic to expect that there would be dramatic changes in the way Ukraine fights. The Russian Army appears to have recovered from some of the mistakes it made during the first few months of the invasion, and is proving to be surprisingly innovative and effective in defence.[\[8\]](#)

The Russian military is also taking advantage of its air power, such as using its Ka-52 Alligator attack helicopters. These helicopters are being used to fire rockets at Ukrainian Armoured Vehicles which have been forced to slow down or stop after encountering a minefield. Kyiv was under considerable international pressure to show results in order to maintain enthusiasm from its Western allies on whom it is depending for its weaponry and economic support. But by diverting more troops for a counter offensive they are creating a weakness in their own defensive layout which the Russians may exploit. Hence the dilemma regarding the quantum of troops to be launched for a counter offensive and the need to have available reserves to fight a defensive battle is a predicament that cannot be easily answered. Surprisingly, one of the prerequisites of a successful counter offensive, a favourable air situation over the battlefield is nonexistent as far as Ukraine is concerned.

An Assessment

While Russia was strengthening its defences, Ukraine was putting together newly-formed Armoured Brigades, many of them trained in Europe and supplied with better equipment than the Russians. But these need to be validated and integrated before being launched into battle. Optimum utilisation of state-of-the-art equipment can only come after streamlining training in tactics and procedures and carrying out integration with other arms.[\[9\]](#)

While Ukraine now has the capability to launch missiles, rockets or shells deep behind Russian lines, hitting their fuel depots, ammunition hubs and Command and Control Centres, which could weaken Russia's defences, they need to follow up aerial strikes with a ground offensive.

As per a Washington Post report The US intelligence community assesses that Ukraine's counteroffensive will fail to reach the key South Eastern city of Melitopol. Should it prove correct, it means Kyiv won't fulfill its principal objective of severing Russia's land bridge to Crimea in this year's push.[\[10\]](#)

In an interview quoted in The Washington Post, General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the United States has been clear about the difficult task facing Ukraine. "I had said a couple of months ago that this offensive was going to be long, it's going to be bloody, it's going to be slow. And that's exactly what it is: long, bloody and slow, and it's a very, very difficult fight".[\[11\]](#)

There is no doubt a fine balance that needs to be maintained and that is where the art of 'generalship' in war lies. The side that is able to "create an asymmetrical attrition gradient" that conserves manpower and equipment while gradually wearing down the adversary's manpower and equipment will no doubt prevail even at the cost of loss of territory.

The issue is – Does Ukraine have the availability of adequately trained troops and resources to overcome the odds and outperform the Russians ensuring that their troops are sufficiently degraded.

Conclusion

The Ukrainians had for months poured tremendous resources into Bakhmut, including soldiers, ammunition and time, but lost control of the city, the clarity of a rear-view mirror shows that this has led to a weakened force availability for the counter offensive.

The question is that two months into this counter-offensive, and with time of the essence before the onset of winter, are Ukrainian troops making any real progress? and why is Ukraine's progress so slow?

In the last two months Ukrainian forces have been attacking on three fronts, using Western-supplied equipment and training, and probing for weak spots along the entire 1100 km front line. While progress is being made, it is slower than Ukraine and its Western allies had hoped.

But did the Russians foresee their intentions, and spent months building the most extensive fortifications in recent history. Russia still occupies nearly one-fifth of Ukraine - including the cities of Donetsk and Mariupol, which it captured after months of siege and its forces are well dug in. Ukraine is now having to scale back its ambitions in the south, including aspirations to take back Crimea as its ambitions do not match its military capability and ability.

Presently, the counter offensive seems to be sputtering and the culmination point, as far as Ukraine is concerned, is reaching before achieving their stated objectives. The critical question remains as to what is an achievable definition of victory for Ukraine and defeat for Russia, at least in the current impasse of a contest that presently seems to be at a stalemate?

Endnotes

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[3] Ukraine Says It Retook Two Villages As Counteroffensive Gathers Steam, Radio free Europe, 11 June 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-heavy-fighting-russia-donbas-counteroffensive/32454060.html>

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[5] Frank Gardner & Jake Horton, Ukraine counter-offensive against Russia yields only small gains in first 2 months, The BBC, 05 August 2023 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66383377>

[6] Ibid

[7] Jo Adetunji, Ukraine war: gaining a bridgehead east of the Dnipro river would be a gamechanger for Kyiv – here's why, The Conversation, 17 August 2023, <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-war-gaining-a-bridgehead-east-of-the-dnipro-river-would-be-a-gamechanger-for-kyiv-heres-why-211692>

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[9] Ibid

[10] John Hudson and Alex Horton, U.S. intelligence says Ukraine will fail to meet offensive's key goal

[11] Ibid

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