

Bound to Lose - Ukraine's 2023 Counteroffensive

By John J. Mearsheimer – Substack, Sept 2023

[Matthias Chang's comments: This article by Prof John Mearsheimer (not a militaryman) put to shame the generals (currently serving or retired) in the US, UK, NATO and their vassal states of their understanding of basic military strategic and tactics. If there is an article that summarises the years of research on military affairs, this is THE article, for it explains how wars were and ought to be fought and more importantly how to win the war, regardless whether it is a "fair fight" or an "unfair fight". The principles explained, can apply to "political warfare" and the political wars in Malaysia are a microcosm of the larger picture where big powers and big armies will fight to the last man standing.]

It is now clear that Ukraine's eagerly anticipated counteroffensive has been a colossal failure.^[1] After three months, the Ukrainian army has made little progress pushing back the Russians. Indeed, it has yet to get beyond the so-called "grey zone," the heavily contested strip of land that lies in front of the first main line of Russian defenses.

The New York Times reports that "In the first two weeks of the counteroffensive, as much as 20 per cent of the weaponry Ukraine sent to the battlefield was damaged or destroyed, according to U.S. and European officials. The toll included some of the formidable Western fighting machines — tanks and armored personnel carriers — that the Ukrainians were counting on to beat back the Russians."^[2] According to virtually all accounts of the fighting, Ukrainian troops have suffered enormous casualties.^[3] All nine of the vaunted brigades that NATO armed and trained for the counteroffensive have been badly chewed up on the battlefield.

The Ukrainian counteroffensive was doomed to fail from the start. A look at the line-up of forces on both sides and what the Ukrainian army was trying to do, coupled with an understanding of the history of conventional land war, make it clear that there was virtually no chance the attacking Ukrainian forces could defeat Russia's defending forces and achieve their political goals.

Ukraine and its Western supporters hoped that the Ukrainian army could execute a classic blitzkrieg strategy to escape the war of attrition that was grinding it down. That plan called for punching a large hole in Russia's defensive lines and then driving deep into Russian-controlled territory, not only capturing territory along the way, but delivering a hammer blow to the Russian army. **As the historical record makes clear, this is an especially difficult operation to pull off when the attacking forces are engaged in a fair fight – one involving two roughly equal militaries. The Ukrainians were not only involved in a fair fight, but they were also ill-prepared to execute a blitzkrieg and were facing an adversary well-positioned to thwart one. In**

short, the deck was stacked against the Ukrainian counteroffensive from the start.

Nevertheless, there was pervasive optimism about Ukraine's battlefield prospects among Western policymakers, pundits and editorial writers in the mainstream media, retired generals, and other experts in the American and European foreign policy establishments.^[4]

Retired General David Petraeus's comments on the eve of the counteroffensive capture the prevailing zeitgeist: "I think that this counteroffensive is going to be very impressive." He then effectively described the Ukrainians executing a successful blitzkrieg against Russian forces.^[5]

In fact, Western leaders and the mainstream media put significant pressure on Kyiv to launch the counteroffensive in the months before it began on 4 June. At the time, Ukraine's leaders were dragging their feet and showing little enthusiasm for starting the planned blitzkrieg, probably because at least some of them understood they were being led to the slaughter. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky later said on 21 July that, "We did have plans to start it in the spring, but we didn't because, frankly, we had not enough munitions and armaments and not enough properly trained brigades."^[6] Moreover, after the counteroffensive began, General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the Ukrainian military's commander in chief, angrily told *The Washington Post* that he felt the West had not provided Ukraine with adequate arms and that "without being fully supplied, these plans are not feasible at all. But they are being carried out."^[7]

Even after the counteroffensive bogged down, which happened shortly after it started, many optimists continued to hold out hope that it would eventually succeed, although their numbers have declined over time. Retired US General Ben Hodges, one of the most enthusiastic advocates of launching the blitzkrieg, maintained on 15 June, "I think the Ukrainians can and will win this fight."^[8] Dara Massicot, a prominent expert often cited in the mainstream media, opined on 19 July that "For now, the Russian front lines are holding, despite the Kremlin's dysfunctional decisions. Yet the cumulative pressure of bad choices is mounting. Russian front lines might crack in the way Hemingway once wrote about going bankrupt: 'gradually, then suddenly'." Michael Kofman, another expert frequently cited by the mainstream press, claimed on 2 August that "the counteroffensive itself hasn't failed," while *The Economist* ran a story on 16 August that proclaimed: "Ukraine's counter-offensive is making progress, slowly: Ten weeks in, the army is starting to figure out what works."^[9]

A week later, on 22 August, when it was hard to deny that the counteroffensive was in serious trouble and there was hardly any chance of rectifying the situation, Jake Sullivan, the US national security advisor, stated: "We do not assess that the conflict is a stalemate. We are seeing Ukraine continue to take territory on a methodical, systematic basis."^[10]

Sullivan's comments notwithstanding, many in the West now recognize that the counteroffensive has failed, and Ukraine is doomed to fight a war of attrition that

it is unlikely to win, chiefly because the conflict is slowly morphing from a fair fight into an unfair fight. But it should have been obvious to Ukraine's Western cheerleaders beforehand that the blitzkrieg they embraced was doomed to fail and that it made little sense to push Ukraine to launch it.

UKRAINE'S THEORY OF VICTORY

The Russian and Ukrainian militaries have been engaged in a fair fight since the war began in February 2022. The Russian invasion force, which was comprised of 190,000 troops at most, conquered a substantial amount of Ukrainian territory, but soon found itself overextended. In other words, it did not have sufficient troops to defend all the Ukrainian territory it controlled. Consequently, the Russians withdrew most of their forces from the Kharkiv oblast, which allowed the Ukrainian army to overwhelm the remaining few. Subsequently, the overstretched Russian army was forced to withdraw from the slice of the Kherson oblast that lies on the west bank of the Dnieper River, which the Ukrainian army then occupied without a fight. **Before the Russians withdrew, however, they inflicted massive casualties on the Ukrainian forces that were trying to drive them out of Kherson. One battalion commander reported that his casualties were so high that he had "to replace the members of his unit three times."**^[11] These two tactical defeats took place in the late summer and fall of 2022.

In response to the events in Kharkiv and Kherson, Putin mobilized 300,000 troops in September 2022; they would need a few months of training before they were fully ready to fight. The Russians also scaled up their ongoing effort to capture Bakhmut in November 2022. The Ukrainians responded to the challenge in Bakhmut, and the two sides engaged in a long and grinding battle for control of that city, which finally ended with a Russian victory in late May 2023.

Bakhmut was a serious defeat for Ukraine, in part because Zelensky publicly said that he and his generals were determined to hold the city and because he committed many of Ukraine's best units to the fight.^[12] **More importantly, Ukraine suffered huge losses in the months-long battle.**^[13] **To make matters worse, the war was likely to turn into an unfair fight in the months ahead, because the Russians had gained about a 5:1 advantage in population size in the wake of the early fighting, which meant they could mobilize a much larger army than Ukraine, giving them an advantage that matters greatly in attrition warfare.** Furthermore, the Russians already enjoyed a significant advantage in artillery, the most important weapon in a war of attrition like the one being fought in Ukraine. Neither Kyiv nor the West had the capability to rectify that imbalance, which was estimated to be somewhere between 5:1 and 10:1 in Russia's favor.^[14]

Indeed, there was reason to think that the West might not remain fully committed to supplying Ukraine with the weaponry it desperately needed, which included other kinds of arms besides artillery, like tanks, armored fighting vehicle, drones, and aircraft. There was growing evidence of war fatigue in the West and plus the US faced a threat from China in East Asia that was a greater

danger to American interests than the Russian threat. In short, Ukraine was likely to lose in a protracted war of attrition, because it would be an unfair fight.

Both Ukraine and the West therefore had a powerful incentive to find a clever strategy that would quickly produce a military victory that would end the war on favorable terms for them.^[15] This meant Ukraine would have to employ a blitzkrieg strategy, which is the only way of avoiding or escaping a war of attrition in a contest between two equally-matched land armies facing each other across a continuous front.^[16]

THE ABC'S OF BLITZKRIEG

A blitzkrieg relies on the mobility and speed inherent in an armored strike force to defeat an opponent without engaging a series of bloody and protracted battles.^[17] That strategy is predicated on the assumption that the opponent's army is a large and complex machine that is geared to fighting along a well-established defensive line. In the machine's rear lies a vulnerable network, which comprises numerous lines of communication, along which information and supplies move, as well as key nodal points where the various lines intersect. Destruction of this central nervous system is tantamount to the destruction of the defending army.

A blitzkrieg involves two major operations: winning a breakthrough battle and executing a deep strategic penetration. To be more specific, the attacker aims to surreptitiously concentrate its armored forces at a specific location or two along the front line, where the defender's force-to-space ratio is low and where the attacker can achieve numerical superiority over the defender. A defense that is thinly spread out and outnumbered is relatively easy to break through. After opening a hole or two in the defender's front line, the attacker seeks to move rapidly into the depths of the defense before the target state's forces can move to cut off the penetration. Although it may be necessary to engage in a set-piece battle to accomplish the initial breakthrough, a high premium is placed on avoiding further battles of this sort. Instead, the attacker follows the path of least resistance deep into the defender's rear.

The tank, with its inherent flexibility, is the ideal weapon for making a blitzkrieg work. Artillery, however, does not play a major role in blitzkrieg, in part because it requires significant logistical support, which interferes with the rapid movement of second-echelon forces into the expanding salient and more generally is a drag on mobility. Furthermore, engaging in large-scale artillery exchanges would waste valuable time and slow down the advancing armored forces. Close air support, on the other hand, presents none of these problems. Given the inherent flexibility of airplanes, drones, and helicopters, this flying artillery is an excellent counterpart to fast-moving armored forces.

As should be obvious, a blitzkrieg demands a flexible command structure peopled from top to bottom with soldiers capable of exercising initiative in

combat situations where the fog of war is sometimes thick. A blitzkrieg is not based on a rigid plan that commanders must follow closely. In fact, the opposite is true. Before launching the attack, an overall objective is set, and detailed plans for the breakthrough battle are prepared. But there are no rigid guidelines for the commanders to follow as they conduct the deep strategic penetration. The underlying assumption is that no one can predict with any degree of certainty how the battle will develop. Uncertainty will be commonplace and therefore risks will have to be taken. In essence, a high premium is placed on a commander's ability to make rapid-fire decisions that will enable the armored forces to maintain a high speed of advance in the wake of winning the breakthrough battle. Boldness is essential, even when information is incomplete, so that the attacking army can maintain the initiative.

Finally, some words are in order about the objectives associated with blitzkrieg. The usual aim is to decisively defeat the defender's military forces. It is possible, however, to employ a blitzkrieg to win a limited victory, where the defending forces are encircled and clobbered but not completely defeated, and where the attacker captures a significant amount of the defender's territory.

The problem with not scoring a decisive victory, however, is that the fighting is likely to continue, which almost certainly means a war of attrition. Modern wars, it should be emphasized, not only tend to escalate, but they are also difficult to end. Thus, leaders have a powerful incentive to employ a blitzkrieg to win a decisive victory over the defending army, and not to pursue a limited victory.

Bringing in The Defender

The focus up to now has been on how the offender executes a blitzkrieg. But to fully understand the workings of a blitzkrieg and the likelihood of one succeeding, it is essential to consider the defender's capabilities as well as its strategy for thwarting a blitzkrieg.

The key issue regarding capabilities is what the balance of forces between the defender and the offender looks like. Is there rough equality in terms of the quality and quantity of both their troops and their armaments? If so, a fair fight is in store. If one side, however, has clearly superior fighting forces in terms of either quality, quantity, or both, it will be an unfair fight. The difference between a fair and an unfair fight matters greatly for determining a blitzkrieg's prospects of success.

For starters, it is much more difficult to make a blitzkrieg work in a fair fight, because the defender is not outmatched from the get-go. It is a tangle between two formidable fighting forces, not a mismatch, which makes it difficult for the attacker to be confident of success. Additionally, the consequences of a failed blitzkrieg are markedly different in the two types of fights. If a blitzkrieg fails in a fair fight, the result is likely to be a protracted war of attrition where the outcome is difficult to predict. After all, the conflict is between evenly matched opponents. But if a blitzkrieg comes up short in an unfair fight, the attacker is

almost certain to win the ensuing war rather quickly and easily, simply because it enjoys a marked material advantage over the defender.

The defender's strategy for thwarting a blitzkrieg also has a profound influence on the outcome.^[18] At the most basic level, the target state can deploy its forces in three different ways: forward defense, defense-in-depth, and mobile defense.

With **forward defense**, most of the defender's forces are placed on the line separating the opposing armies to prevent the attacker from making a breakthrough. The defender also locates a reasonable number of its fighting forces behind the front line in mobile reserves that can move rapidly to shut down a potential breakthrough. The emphasis, however, is on defending in force along the initial line of contact. This is not to deny, however, that the defender can be tactically flexible in how it handles the attacking forces along the front line. For example, it might attempt to draw them into controlled zones where they can be pummeled by artillery.

Defense in depth is comprised of a series of well-defended lines – one a good distance behind the other – which are designed to wear the attacking army down as it fights its way through each defensive belt. Not only is it difficult for the attacking forces to break through the first line of defense, but even if they do, there is no possibility of outrunning the defender's reserves and executing a deep strategic penetration. Instead, the attacker must fight a series of set-piece battles as it attempts to punch through the defender's successive lines of defense.

Defense in depth is ideally suited for thwarting a blitzkrieg; it is probably the best of the three strategies for that purpose. Its major drawback is that it usually requires an especially large number of troops. It also calls for the defender not to maximize the number of troops and obstacles that it places at the front line, but instead to make sure that each line of defense is thickly populated with barriers and soldiers. Of course, defending troops along the line of contact can retreat to lines of defense behind them. Many commanders, however, will be inclined to defend the forward edge of the battle area with as many troops as possible.

Finally, there is **mobile defense**, which is the boldest of the three strategies. The defender locates a small portion of its troops in forward positions, where they can hinder the attacking forces somewhat, but otherwise allows them to penetrate deep into its rear area. At the appropriate time, the defender uses its Sunday punch – a large body of its own mobile forces – to strike into the flanks of the penetration and cut the attacking forces off from their base. In effect, the invading forces are encircled and isolated, making them an easy target for destruction. **Mobile defense is a highly demanding and risky strategy, especially compared to the other two defensive strategies, which simply aim to wear down the attacking armored forces by forcing them to fight their way through well-fortified defensive positions.**

THE HISTORY OF BLITZKRIEG

Let us now consider how the historical record fits with these analytical frameworks describing the ABC's of blitzkrieg. There have been 11 blitzkriegs since the arrival of the tank on the battlefield, four of which involved fair fights, seven of which were unfair fights. The attacker succeeded in one of the four fair fights and in all seven of the unfair fights.

Germany launched five major offensives in World War II: against Poland in 1939, France in 1940, the Soviet Union in 1941 and then again in 1942, and against the Allied armies in 1944. The Wehrmacht did not employ a blitzkrieg strategy against Poland, although substantial tank forces were engaged in the operation.^[19] It simply steamrolled over the Polish military in what was clearly an unfair fight. One year later in the spring of 1940 the Germans launched a blitzkrieg in France and won a decisive victory. It was the first case of a blitzkrieg, and it was a fair fight. The following year, Hitler's forces invaded the Soviet Union, engaging in another fair fight. They employed a blitzkrieg, which aimed to inflict a decisive defeat on the Red Army west of the Dnieper River. They failed to achieve that objective and the offensive eventually stalled outside Moscow in early December 1941. Seeking to avoid a war of attrition, the Wehrmacht launched a second offensive against the Red Army in late June 1942, this time driving deep toward the oil-rich areas in the Caucasus and southern Russia, hoping that capturing them would deliver a fatal blow to the Soviet Union. Despite impressive victories in the early months of the campaign, the 1942 blitzkrieg came up short and the Wehrmacht ended up in a war of attrition on the Eastern Front. Lastly, the Germans launched a blitzkrieg in the Ardennes Forest in December 1944, hoping to split and seriously weaken the American and British armies, capture the important port of Antwerp, and hopefully compel the Allies to surrender. Despite an initial breakthrough, the German offensive failed.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) launched blitzkriegs against the Egyptian army in 1956 and 1967. In both cases, the Israelis decisively defeated the Egyptians, but neither was a fair fight as the IDF was a superior fighting force. There have been five other blitzkriegs besides the four German and two Israeli cases: the 1945 Soviet offensive against Japan's Kwantung Army in Manchuria; the North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1950; the Indian offensive against East Pakistan in 1971; the Vietnamese strike into Cambodia in 1979; and the US-led attack against the Iraqi army in Kuwait in 1991. These cases, like the two Israeli cases, were unfair fights.^[20]

This brief history points up that the fall of France in 1940 is the only case where a blitzkrieg succeeded in a fair fight. And while that German victory is one of the most impressive campaigns in military history, it was a close call.^[21] The Wehrmacht probably would have failed to achieve a quick and decisive victory if the French forces had been deployed somewhat differently or if the defending forces had reacted more quickly and effectively to the critically important German breakthrough at Sedan. The other three fair fights also involved the Wehrmacht; in each case either the Red Army or the Allies thwarted the German blitzkrieg. The other seven cases were all unfair fights in which the attacker unsurprisingly scored a decisive victory. In no instance was a blitzkrieg

employed to win a limited victory. The aim in all eleven cases was to decisively defeat the target state's military.

Turning to the defender's strategy, a forward defense strategy was employed in all eleven cases. It is not surprising that there is no case of a target state employing a mobile defense, as that strategy is the most demanding and the riskiest. There is also no case of a defender relying on a defense in depth to thwart a blitzkrieg, which is surprising as it is well-suited for that purpose.^[22] It seems clear that given the available resources, commanders preferred to place the brunt of their forces well forward and not worry much about thickly populating the follow-on lines of defense.

In the eleven cases of blitzkrieg, all of which involved striking against an opponent employing a forward defense strategy, the attacking forces broke through the initial line of defense every time. In eight of the eleven cases, the ensuing deep strategic penetration led to a decisive victory.^[23] The three exceptions are the German blitzkriegs against the Red Army in 1941 and 1942, and against the Allies in 1944. In all three cases, the defender was able to create new lines of defense in their rear and wear down the Wehrmacht. In effect, both the Red Army's and the Allies' forward defense strategy morphed into a defense in depth, which, as emphasized, is ideally suited for defeating a blitzkrieg.

UKRAINE'S DOOMED OFFENSIVE

This brief history of blitzkrieg, coupled with an understanding of how that strategy works, sheds much light on the prospects of the Ukrainian counteroffensive succeeding. In fact, the evidence shows Kyiv's blitzkrieg stood virtually no chance of succeeding. For starters, Ukraine was engaged in a fair fight, which meant that almost everything would have to go right for the strategy to work as intended. The Ukrainian army, however, was poorly suited for launching a blitzkrieg and, to make matters worse, it was striking against a formidable defense-in-depth. Ukraine's only hope was that the Russian army would collapse once the counteroffensive was underway. But there was an abundance of evidence, which indicated that Russians were becoming better fighters who were likely to put up fierce resistance. Still, even if the Ukrainians were able to pull off a miracle and make the blitzkrieg work, the war would still go on, because Kyiv's blitzkrieg did not aim to decisively defeat the Russians, who would survive to fight another day. Simply put, there was no way Ukraine could avoid continuing its war of attrition with Russia.

A Fair Fight

To determine whether Ukraine was engaged in a fair or unfair fight going into the counteroffensive, it is necessary to compare the quantity and the quality of the troops as well as the weaponry in the opposing armies.

Regarding the number of soldiers each side had ready for the fight, it is impossible to get precise figures. Nevertheless, the available evidence indicates that the size of the two forces going into the counteroffensive was roughly

equal. I estimate that each side had roughly 250,000 soldiers who were prepared for the fight.^[24] Tellingly, I cannot find evidence of anyone claiming that either side had a meaningful numerical advantage on the eve of the counteroffensive. Ukraine's real problem was the future, not the present, as the balance of soldiers is going to shift against them over time. Russia has a much larger population to draw from – a 5:1 advantage – and its military is growing larger by the day. In addition to the 300,000 reservists mobilized in October 2022, the Russian Defense Ministry, reports that 231,000 people enlisted in the military during the first seven months of 2023.^[25]

In terms of the quality of those fighting forces – to include their resolve – it appears that there is little difference between the two sides. One often hears the claim in the West that the Russians are “suffering serious morale and other systemic problems” and thus there was a good chance they would crack in the face of the counteroffensive.^[26] But that is not the view one usually hears from the Ukrainian military (which is doing the fighting), where it is widely acknowledged that the Russian army has become a more formidable fighting force since the war started and is not about to collapse anytime soon.^[27] Indeed, the fact that Russian forces were able to wear down the Ukrainians, who fought bravely and tenaciously, in the fiercely contested battle for Bakhmut – which happened in the months before the counteroffensive began – shows that the Ukrainians did not have a meaningful qualitative edge on the battlefield by the late spring of 2023.

Turning to the weaponry available to both armies, Russia surely had an advantage, simply because it had much more artillery than Ukraine. Although some of Ukraine's Western-supplied artillery was qualitatively superior to Russia, it did not come close to making up for the quantitative imbalance. Nevertheless, Ukraine had enough artillery to wage a breakthrough battle. For purposes of executing the deep strategic penetration, artillery is less important because of the important role that close air support is expected to play in that phase of the campaign. Regarding tanks, armored fighting vehicles, and other weapons in the opposing armies there was rough equivalence in terms of their quality and quantity. As with troop numbers, that situation would change to Russia's advantage over time.

In brief, given the Russian advantage in artillery, it is not an open and shut case that this was a fair fight. But given the rough balance of soldiers and other kinds of weaponry, and the fact that artillery is not as important for the attacking forces in a blitzkrieg as it is for attrition warfare, it seems reasonable to call it a fair fight. Still, if one wants to make the case that this was an unfair fight, it was the Russians – not the Ukrainians – who held an advantage when the counteroffensive started on 4 June.

As emphasized, the Wehrmacht's 1940 victory in France is the only instance of a blitzkrieg succeeding in a fair fight. How likely was the Ukrainian counteroffensive to add a second case to the historical record? To answer that question, it is essential to assess how capable the Ukrainian army was of executing a blitzkrieg and how well-prepared the Russians were for preventing that outcome.

Ukrainian Capabilities for Launching a Blitzkrieg

There is no question that blitzkrieg, to quote Barry Posen, is “one of the most daunting of military tasks.”^[28] The attacking Ukrainian forces, as he notes, had to “break through dense, well-prepared defensive positions, find some running room, and then either move quickly toward an important geographic objective such as the Sea of Azov, hoping to unravel the remains of the defending Russian army along the way, or quickly attempt to encircle a portion of Russia’s sizable forces in hopes of annihilating them.” The deep strategic penetration, in other words, had to be executed quickly, while the defending Russian forces were on their heels. That meant the breakthrough battle also had to be won quickly, so that the Russians would not have time to move their reserves to seal off any penetrations of their front line.^[29]

This demanding task naturally requires highly trained and experienced soldiers organized into large-size armor units – be they brigades or divisions – that could operate together on the battlefield. The key units in the Ukrainian army that were tasked with making the blitzkrieg work were poorly trained and lacking in combat experience, especially as it relates to armored warfare. The main striking force was comprised of 12 brigades, nine of which NATO armed and trained for 4-6 weeks.^[30] Many of the 36,000 troops in those nine brigades were raw recruits. It is worth noting that only 11 percent of the 20,000 Ukrainian soldiers that Britain has trained since the war began had any military experience.^[31]

There is simply no way a recruit can be turned into a highly competent soldier with 4-6 weeks of training. It is impossible to do anything more than teach the basics of soldiering in such a short period. To compound the problem, the emphasis in the training was on turning recruits into soldiers who could fight together in small units, not on training and molding the 9 or 12 brigades in the main strike force to operate together on the battlefield.^[32] Moreover, there is evidence that in some cases, the three battalions that were in those brigades were trained in different countries.^[33] Unsurprisingly, two Western defense analysts who visited the war zone after the counteroffensive began, remarked that: “we are convinced that although Ukrainian forces can fight in a combined-arms fashion, they cannot yet do it at scale.”^[34]

Much is made of the fact that the US and NATO more generally are committed to training the Ukrainians to engage in “combined arms operations,” which was supposed to go a long way toward preparing them for the counteroffensive.^[35] The fact is that the Western armies of 2023 had little experience in armored warfare – the Iraq war took place 20 years ago in 2003 and the Iraqi army quickly disintegrated. And they had no experience fighting a war that was a fair fight. As retired US General Ben Hodges, who had once commanded the US Army in Europe, noted, “I certainly was never involved in a fight as large, violent and disorienting as the battles underway in Ukraine.”^[36] Or as one Ukrainian battalion commander remarked about his American trainers: “They fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the enemy there is not like the Russians.”^[37]

To make matters worse, not only was Ukraine's armored fist poorly trained for the difficult task it was being asked to perform, but it was also filled with soldiers who had little combat experience. This problem had two related causes. First, many Ukrainian soldiers had been killed or seriously wounded during the first 15 months of the war, which limited the number of combat veterans available for the counteroffensive. Second, Ukraine needed to keep most of its best fighters who had survived on the front lines to wage the continuing war.^[38] The battle for Bakhmut, which took place in the months leading up to the counteroffensive and which Kyiv was determined to win, was especially important in this regard, as it was like a vortex that sucked in many of Ukraine's best fighting forces.

It is hardly surprising that after the counteroffensive began, *The New York Times* reported that Ukrainian "soldiers along the front-line blamed commanders for pushing raw recruits into battle and using untested units to spearhead the counteroffensive. Others criticized the inadequacy of a few weeks of basic training in various NATO countries."^[39]

The Ukrainian counteroffensive faced another huge problem: lack of close air support for the attacking forces. It is almost impossible for a blitzkrieg to work without close air support, especially for the deep strategic penetration, but it matters greatly even for purposes of winning the breakthrough battle. As John Nagl, a retired colonel who teaches warfighting at the US Army War College, put it: "America would never attempt to defeat a prepared defense without air superiority, but they [Ukrainians] don't have air superiority. It's impossible to overstate how important air superiority is for fighting a ground fight at a reasonable cost in casualties."^[40] Similarly, General Hodges said, "These Ukrainian troops are being sent to do something we'd never do—launching a counteroffensive without total air superiority."^[41]

Finally, although Ukraine had received a substantial number of tanks and armored fighting vehicles from the West, they did not receive as many as they requested, and they were provided a variety of different kinds, which led to problems with interoperability and maintenance. The Ukrainians also had a shortage of mine-clearing equipment, which is a necessity in a major conventional land war. It is unsurprising, given all these deficiencies, that *The Wall Street Journal* reported after the counteroffensive had begun that "Western military officials knew Kyiv didn't have all the training or weapons—from shells to warplanes—that it needed to dislodge Russian forces. But they hoped Ukrainian courage and resourcefulness would carry the day."^[42] In addition to this wishful thinking, there is substantial evidence that many in the West foolishly believed that the Russian army would perform poorly, if not collapse, in the face of the counteroffensive.

Russian Capabilities for Thwarting a Blitzkrieg

Ukraine's prospects of making the counteroffensive work look even worse when Russia's capabilities for defending it against are factored into the equation.

First, there was virtually no chance that the Ukrainians would surprise the Russian defenders regarding the location of the main attack – as the

Wehrmacht had been able to do against France and Britain in May 1940. It was clear from media accounts, the comments of Ukrainian and Western officials, and just looking at a map, that the main attack would come in the Zaporizhzhia region, and that Ukrainian armored forces would aim to drive from the area around Orikhiv to the Sea of Azov, capturing the town of Tokmak and the city of Melitopol along the way. In effect, the large swath of territory that Russia held in eastern and southern Ukraine would be cut in half, which meant Russia would no longer have a land-bridge to Crimea.

Ukraine was expected to attempt one or more additional breakthroughs along the front line, also ultimately aimed at reaching the Sea of Azov.^[43] One possibility was to penetrate the Russian defenses south of Velyka Novosilka and drive to Mariupol. Another was to break through near Gulyaipole and push toward Berdyansk on the Sea of Azov. Still, the main attack was expected to come in the Orikhiv area and head toward Melitopol. Regardless, the Russians recognized all these possible lines of attack and were well-prepared for each of them.

Furthermore, the Russian military had an abundance of drones and other ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) assets that made it almost impossible for Ukraine to assemble a large strike force without being detected. All of this meant there was hardly any chance that Ukraine could use surprise to gain a significant force advantage at the main point of attack. Instead, the Russian military would be waiting for them in force with a deadly array of highly accurate weapons.^[44]

Second, Russia employed a defense-in-depth, which is the ideal strategy for stopping a blitzkrieg. It was comprised of multiple lines of defense that had infantry trenches, tank ditches, minefields, concrete barriers, and prepared firing positions. Moreover, these defensive fortifications were erected to channel the attacking forces into killing zones, where the Russians would be well-positioned to destroy them. In addition, the Ukrainians would probably have to fight in urban areas like Tokmak and Melitopol, where the going would be slow and the casualties would be high.

The Russian defenses were clearly stronger at some points along the line than others, but they were especially strong in the Zaporizhzhia region, where Ukraine was expected to attempt to make the main breakthrough. The Russian army also had mobile forces in reserve that could be quickly moved to reinforce any points along the fortified lines that were weakening. Finally, the Russian forces were prepared to seriously engage with the attacking forces in the so-called “grey zone,” which is the open area that lies in front of their first prepared line of defense. The basic idea was to wear down the Ukrainian brigades before they reached the initial line of fortifications, or maybe even prevent them from getting there. General Mick Ryan, a retired Australian general, put it well when he described Russia’s defensive architecture as “much more complex, and deadly, than anything experienced by any military in nearly 80 years.”^[45]

Third, to make matters worse, the Russians had a variety of capabilities that made it extremely dangerous for Ukrainian forces to move out in the open,

which they had to do almost all the time since they were on the offensive and had to be constantly moving forward. For starters, the Russians had significant ISR assets that would allow them to detect Ukraine's mobile brigades. And they had an abundance of systems that could strike the attacking forces. The Russians had a huge arsenal of artillery and multiple rocket launchers, which they had shown they could use to deadly effect over the first 15 months of the war. They also had the capability to quickly deploy large numbers of mines, creating instant and deadly minefields in front of attacking forces. Finally, the Russians controlled the skies, which meant they could use their arsenal of helicopters, killer drones, and tactical aircraft to target Ukraine's ground forces.

As one highly knowledgeable blogger on military affairs ("Big Serge") put it: "Western observers do not seem open to the possibility that the accuracy of modern ranged fires (be it Lancet drones, guided artillery shells, or GMLRS rockets) combined with the density of ISR systems may simply make it impossible to conduct sweeping mobile operations, except in very specific circumstances. When the enemy has the capacity to surveil staging areas, strike rear area infrastructure with cruise missiles and drones, precisely saturate approach lines with artillery fire, and soak the earth in mines, how exactly can it be possible to maneuver?"^[46]

In short, there is little doubt the Russians were well-positioned to stop a blitzkrieg in its tracks. Thus, given that the counteroffensive would be a fair fight and the Ukrainians were ill-prepared to launch a blitzkrieg, it is hard to see how they could succeed. The only hope was that the Russian army would fall apart once the shooting started, but there was little reason to think that would happen.

Let us assume I am wrong, and there was a serious chance the blitzkrieg would succeed, as almost every policymaker, pundit, and strategist in the West argued. Even so, the war would not end, and Ukraine would still find itself in a war of attrition that it could not win. Remember, the blitzkrieg did not aim to decisively defeat the Russian army in Ukraine, take back all Ukraine's lost territory, and end the war. Instead, the goal was to seriously damage the Russian forces in Ukraine, take back some territory, and drive Moscow to the negotiating table, where Ukraine and the West would be in the driver's seat.

The Russians, however, were hardly likely to go to the bargaining table and cave into Ukrainian and Western demands. After all, Putin and other Russian leaders believe they are facing an existential threat, which would surely lead them to double down and do whatever is necessary to defeat the enemy at the gates. In short, the Ukrainian blitzkrieg was doomed to fail, but even if it had succeeded in achieving its limited goals, it would not have succeeded in ending the war on favorable terms for Ukraine and the West.

THE RESULTS SO FAR

The counteroffensive has been an abysmal failure, contrary to the expectations of almost everyone in the West. Ukraine has suffered huge casualties and lost large amounts of weaponry in three months of

fighting.^[47] In the process, its army has yet to reach the first line of Russia's defense-in-depth; it remains bogged down fighting in the grey zone located in front of Russia's main defense lines, where, as one Ukrainian soldier put it, "They were just waiting for us...prepared positions everywhere. It was a wall of steel. It was horrendous."^[48] As noted, Western officials report that Ukraine lost about 20 percent of the weapons it employed on the battlefield during the first two weeks of the counteroffensive, which included a good number of the tanks and armored fighting vehicles that the West had provided.^[49]

The Ukrainian military quickly changed tactics after its initial setbacks and instead of trying to fight through the grey zone with armored forces, they decided to try wearing down the Russian forces by attacking them with small infantry units backed up by massive artillery barrages. These were sometimes called "mosquito tactics" in the West.^[50] While this new approach reduced Ukraine's casualties somewhat, the attacking forces made little progress and were frequently the target of withering fire. In late July, Ukraine launched another major strike with tanks and armored fighting vehicles.^[51] Again, the attacking forces made little progress and lost large numbers of men and equipment. It was then back to mosquito tactics. As *The Wall Street Journal* put it after two months of fighting, the Ukrainian counteroffensive is "a slow and bloody advance on foot."^[52]

In effect, Ukraine had given up on executing a blitzkrieg, which can only be accomplished with a large body of armored forces, not with infantrymen moving on foot and backed up by artillery. Of course, it makes little sense to even treat blitzkrieg as a serious option when the Ukrainian forces had not been able to reach Russia's first fortified line of defense, much less break through it. Simply put, there was no chance of Ukraine replicating the feat the Wehrmacht pulled off against French and British forces in 1940. Ukraine was instead destined to fight a war of attrition like World War I on the Western Front, where its heavy losses in the counteroffensive would put it at a major disadvantage moving forward.

It is worth noting that while the Ukrainian army was waging its unsuccessful counteroffensive along the southern and eastern parts of the line of contact, the Russian army was on the offensive in the north, pushing toward the Ukrainian-held city of Kupiansk. The Russians were making slow but steady progress, such that Ukraine's commanding general in the theater announced on 25 August that "we must promptly take all measures to strengthen our defenses on the threatened lines."^[53]

It is now widely recognized that the counteroffensive has failed and there is no serious prospect of Ukraine suddenly achieving success before either the fall rains or Ukrainian leaders shut it down.^[54] For example, *The Kyiv Independent* recently ran a story with the title: "Inching Forward in Bakhmut Counteroffensive, Ukraine's Hardened Units Look Ahead to Long, Grim War."^[55] Relatedly, *The Washington Post* published an article on 10 August that emphasized the dark mood in Ukraine: "Two months after Ukraine went on the attack, with little visible progress on the front and a relentless, bloody summer

across the country, the narrative of unity and endless perseverance has begun to fray. The number of dead — untold thousands — increases daily. Millions are displaced and see no chance of returning home. In every corner of the country, civilians are exhausted from a spate of recent Russian attacks.... Ukrainians, much in need of good news, are simply not getting any.”^[56]

Western elites are now scrambling to find a way to rescue the deteriorating situation. Some still hold out hope that giving Ukraine one or another new weapon will magically turn things around on the battlefield. F-16’s and ATACMS are mentioned most frequently in this regard. But as General Milley put it when throwing cold water on the idea that a handful of F-16’s would reverse Ukraine’s fortunes, “There’s no silver bullet in war. The outcomes of battles and wars are the function of many, many variables.”^[57]

Others focus on how Ukraine fights. Some maintain that Ukraine must become more proficient at conducting “combined arms operations.”^[58] But it is never made clear how that can be done, since Western trainers tried once to teach that skill and apparently failed. Moreover, it is never spelled out how combined arms operations, which are not a strategy, get Ukraine out of the present war of attrition. Relatedly, some argue that Ukraine needs to place more emphasis on maneuver, which is often contrasted with attrition. But maneuver is a battlefield tactic, not a strategy for defeating an opponent. For sure, maneuver matters greatly in executing a deep strategic penetration, although it is of limited use in winning breakthrough battles.^[59] One can also have a war of attrition in which both sides regularly engage in mobile battles that place a high premium on maneuver. But the key question, which proponents of greater maneuver never address, is how does it work at the strategic level to allow Ukraine to escape the grinding attrition warfare it now faces?

It appears that most Western elites and most Ukrainians are resigned to the fact that there is no escaping a bloody war of attrition with Russia.^[60] It also seems that many doubt whether Ukraine can prevail in that fight, which of course is one of the main reasons why the foreign policy elites and policymakers in the West pushed so hard for the counteroffensive. They understood that Ukraine would be in deep trouble in a long war. After all, Russia has a 5:1 advantage in manpower and the ability – at least in the short to medium term – to produce more artillery and other key weapons than Ukraine and the West combined. Moreover, it is not clear that the West, especially the US, will remain fully committed to backing Ukraine when there is little hope of victory. So, Ukraine – with the West pushing from behind – gambled that blitzkrieg would provide the means to escape attrition warfare and ultimately prevail over Russia. But the strategy proved to be a dismal failure. Now, it is hard to tell a story about Ukraine’s future that has a happy ending.

THE DARKNESS AHEAD

What happens next? Two points are in order.

First, there will be a blame game in the months ahead regarding who bears responsibility for the disastrous counteroffensive. Indeed, it has already started.^[61] Few will admit that they were wrong to think the counteroffensive stood a reasonable chance of succeeding or was sure to succeed. That will certainly be true in the US, where accountability is an obsolete concept. Many Ukrainians will blame the West for pushing them to launch the blitzkrieg when the West had failed to provide them with all the weaponry they had requested. Of course, the West will be guilty as charged, but Ukrainian leaders have agency and could have stood up to American pressure. After all, their country's survival is at stake, and they would have been better off staying on the defensive, where they would have suffered fewer casualties and increased their chances of retaining the territory that they now control.

The coming recriminations will be ugly and will hinder Ukraine's efforts to stay in the fight against Russia.

Second, many in the West will argue that the time is now ripe for diplomacy. The failed counteroffensive shows that Ukraine cannot prevail on the battlefield, so the argument will go, and thus it makes sense to reach a peace agreement with Russia, even if Kyiv and the West must make concessions. After all, the situation will only get worse for Ukraine if the war continues.

Regrettably, there is no diplomatic solution in sight. There are irreconcilable differences between the two sides over security guarantees for Ukraine and territory, which stand in the way of a meaningful peace agreement. For understandable reasons, Ukraine is deeply committed to getting back all the land it has lost to Russia, which includes Crimea and the Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts. But Moscow has already annexed those territories and made it clear that it has no intention of returning them to Kyiv.

The other unresolvable issue concerns Ukraine's relationship with the West. For understandable reasons, Ukraine insists that it needs a security guarantee, which can only come from the US and NATO. Russia, on the other hand, insists that Ukraine must be neutral and must end its security relationship with the West. In fact, that issue was the main cause of the present war, even if American and European foreign policy elites refuse to believe it.^[62] Moscow was unwilling to tolerate Ukraine joining NATO. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to see how both sides can be satisfied on either the territorial or neutrality issue.

In addition to those obstacles, both sides view each other as an existential threat, which is an enormous obstacle to any kind of meaningful compromise. It is hard to imagine, for example, the US taking its gun sights off Russia in the foreseeable future. The most likely result is that the war will go on and eventually end in a frozen conflict with Russia in possession of a significant portion of Ukrainian territory. But that outcome will not put an end to the competition and conflict between Russia and Ukraine or between Russia and the West.

Reference:

^[1] This piece benefitted greatly from comments by Ramzy Mardini and Barry Posen.

^[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/02/us/politics/ukraine-troops-counteroffensive-training.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

^[3] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-66581217>

^[4] As best I can tell, the only Western policymaker or establishment pundit who argued that the counteroffensive would fail was Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. He said it “would be a bloodbath” and that Ukraine would not win a meaningful military victory. <https://www.rt.com/news/577355-orban-hungary-ukraine-counteroffensive/> It is worth noting that General Mark Milley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argued in November 2022 that Kyiv should negotiate a settlement, because its prospects on the battlefield were only going to deteriorate moving forward. His advice, which was rejected by Ukraine and the White House, would seem to argue against launching the counteroffensive.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/26/ukraine-counteroffensive-negotiations-milley-biden/> Finally, there are several individuals who operate on alternative media who argued that the counteroffensive would fail before it was launched. They include Brian Berletic, Alex Christoforou, Glenn Diesen, Douglas Macgregor, Moon of Alabama, Alexander Mercouris, and Scott Ritter.

^[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2023/jun/03/russia-ukraine-war-live-russian-army-may-struggle-in-bakhmut-compared-with-wagner-uk-mod-suggests?page=with:block-647afd7a8f08b007454b97f0#block-647afd7a8f08b007454b97f0>

^[6] <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/02/us/politics/ukraine-troops-counteroffensive-training.html>

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^[9] <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/19/opinion/putin-prigozhin-military-russia.html>

<https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/08/16/ukraines-counter-offensive-is-making-progress-slowly>

<https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2023/07/28/franz-stefan-gady-and-michael-kofman-on-what-ukraine-must-do-to-break-through-russian-defences>

<https://time.com/6300772/ukraine-counteroffensive-can-still-succeed/>

Comment is Freed

Ukraine's Counter-Offensive: Setting Expectations

In a recent blog for Foreign Affairs I argued that even as Putin's original objectives drift out of reach another objective takes over - that of 'not losing', for with losing comes the reckoning. Failure is measured not only in the objectives that will forever stay unmet, but the casualties and costs accumulated during the course of the war, and the da...

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<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putin-running-out-options-ukraine>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2023/08/ukraine-counteroffensive-russia-war/674899/>

<https://www.rand.org/blog/2023/07/a-winnable-war.html>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/18/ukraine-war-west-gloom/>

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/02/us/politics/ukraine-troops-counteroffensive-training.html>

^[10] <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2023/08/22/we-do-not-assess-that-the-conflict-is-a-stalemate-00112284>

^[11] <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/07/world/europe/ukraine-marines-counteroffensive.html>

^[12] <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/22/world/europe/zelensky-bakhmut-ukraine.html>

^[13] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64935449>

<https://www.npr.org/2023/04/25/1171800380/thousands-of-ukrainian-and-russian-soldiers-have-died-in-the-battle-for-bakhmut>

^[14] https://mearsheimer.substack.com/p/the-darkness-ahead-where-the-ukraine?utm_source=profile&utm_medium=reader2

^[15] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/06/14/ukraine-counteroffensive-biden-support/>

<https://www.politico.com/news/2023/06/08/biden-ukraine-counteroffensive-00101088>

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<https://news.antiwar.com/2023/08/06/poll-most-americans-oppose-more-spending-on-the-ukraine-war/>

^[16] One sometimes hears criticism of the British generals in World War I for not finding a smart strategy for avoiding the deadly attrition battles on the Western Front. They were “donkeys,” so the argument goes, who were content to send huge numbers of British soldiers to their death. The truth is that those generals tried hard to find a clever way to win a quick victory – Britain invented the tank for this purpose – but there was none at the time, as blitzkrieg was then not a viable option. See John J. Mearsheimer, *B.H. Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), chapter 3.

^[17] My thinking about blitzkrieg and conventional land war more generally are laid out in greater detail in, John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983); John J. Mearsheimer, “Assessing the Conventional Balance: The 3:1 Rule and Its Critics,” *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Spring 1989), pp. 54-89; John J. Mearsheimer, “Correspondence: Reassessing Net Assessment,” *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Spring 1989), pp. 128-44; John J. Mearsheimer, “Numbers, Strategy, and the European Balance,” *International Security*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Spring 1988), pp. 174-85; John J. Mearsheimer, “Maneuver, Mobile Defense and the NATO Central Front,” *International Security*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 1981/1982), pp. 104-22; and Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*.

^[18] The terrain over which a blitzkrieg is contested also influences the outcome in important ways. But I do not elaborate on that element of the equation because of space constraints.

^[19] The Anglo-American campaign against the Wehrmacht between the Normandy breakout in late July 1944 and the final collapse of Germany in May 1945 fits the same pattern. Although the Allies employed substantial armored forces and made some significant tactical penetrations, they effectively steamrolled the opposing German forces.

^[20] To further illustrate my point about the difference between fair and unfair fights, consider that if the IDF had been fighting against the Wehrmacht instead of the Egyptian army, the Israeli blitzkriegs probably would have failed.

^[21] See Robert A Doughty, *The Breaking Point: Sedan and the Fall of France, 1940* (Stackpole Books, 2014).

^[22] The Red Army employed a defense-in-depth against the Wehrmacht in the Battle of Kursk (1943) to great effect. But I do not consider that German offensive to be a case of attempted blitzkrieg, but instead view it as a local battle of annihilation.

^[23] It is worth noting that seven of those eight cases were unfair fights.

^[24] Ukraine appears to have had about 38 combat-ready maneuver brigades available for the counteroffensive. Assuming there were roughly 4,000 soldiers in each maneuver brigade, that would mean a total of approximately 150,000. In addition, Ukraine had substantial numbers of support troops outside those maneuver brigades, to include 9 artillery brigades. It would be reasonable to assume there were 100,000 support troops prepared to engage in the counteroffensive, bringing the overall total for Ukraine to 250,000. The Russians on the other hand, appear to have had somewhere between 200,000 and 300,000 combat and support troops in Ukraine organized into about 40 brigades that were prepared to deal with the counteroffensive. These calculations are based largely on:

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-ukrainian-military-must-reorganize-to-defeat-russia/>

Simplicius's Garden of Knowledge

SITREP 8/5/23: Projecting the Intermediate Future

There aren't a whole lot of significant battlefield updates just yet, so I wanted to take this time to project what the medium-term future will look like based on Ukraine and the West's signaled plans for the next 6 months and more. But first, let's summarize roughly where things stand, particularly vis a vis the grand summer 'offensive' so that we're a...

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<https://www.rt.com/russia/580720-western-trained-troops-counteroffensive/>

<https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2023/08/01/no-breakthrough-yet-in-ukraines-counteroffensive-00109205>

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<https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/25/europe/russia-ukraine-military-comparison-intl/index.html>

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^[25] <https://www.rt.com/russia/580780-russian-army-enlistment-medvedev/>

https://substack.com/app-link/post?publication_id=1351274&post_id=135418705&utm_source=post-email-title&isFreemail=false&token=eyJ1c2VvYXZlIjoxMTE5NzQ0NCwicG9zdF9pZCI6MTM1NDE4NzA1LCJpYXQiOiJlOTg4NjksImV4cCI6MTY5MzE5MDg2OSwiaXNzIjoicHVlTEZzNTEyNzQiLCJzdWliOiJwb3N0LXJlYWN0aW9uIn0.3U-MsZDiFuRuhVF-x-SfzG1bi-bSiB67Jr8jePRfRKQ

^[26] <https://time.com/6300772/ukraine-counteroffensive-can-still-succeed/>

^[27] As one Ukrainian deputy brigade commander put it: “You cannot underestimate the enemy. The enemy is strong and cunning. So this counteroffensive requires steady preparation.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/07/world/europe/ukraine-marines-counteroffensive.html>

<https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/meatgrinder-russian-tactics-second-year-its-invasion-ukraine>

Simplicius's Garden of Knowledge

Dissecting West Point Think-tank's New Analysis of Russia's Military Evolution
The Modern War Institute at West Point—a sort of think tank chaired by Mark Esper and which is a part of the Department of Military Instruction—released a very interesting in-depth analysis of Russia's battlefield innovations in the SMO, called: THE RUSSIAN WAY OF WAR IN UKRAINE: A MILITARY APPROACH NINE DECADES IN THE MAKING...

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/23/world/europe/weary-soldiersunreliable-munitions-ukraines-many-challenges.html>

<https://www.economist.com/international/2023/07/25/is-ukraines-offensive-stal>

^[28] <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/03/ukraine-counteroffensive-breakthrough-problem/>

^[29] For excellent discussions of the difficulties the Ukrainian strike forces would face in the breakthrough battle as well as the deep strategic penetration, see:

Big Serge Thought

Escaping Attrition: Ukraine Rolls the Dice

It has been a while since I published anything long-form commenting on the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, and I confess that writing this article gave me a modicum of trouble. Ukraine's much anticipated grand summer counteroffensive has now been underway for about eighty days with little to show for it. The s...
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<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/08/03/ukraine-counteroffensive-breakthrough-problem/>

^[30] <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/07/world/europe/ukraine-marines-counteroffensive.html>

^[31] <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/07/25/german-military-ukraine-counter-offensive-too-slow/>

NATO had trained a total of roughly 60,000 Ukrainians before the counteroffensive, which includes the 36,000 in the nine brigades that formed the core of Ukraine's main strike force. The US trained more than 11,000 of those troops.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/26/world/europe/ukraine-counteroffensive.html#:~:text=Ukraine%20has%20launched%20the%20main,in%20the%20southern%20Zaporizhzhia%20region>

<https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3429774/secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-and-joint-chiefs-of-staff-chairman-gene/>

^[32] <https://jamestown.org/program/ukraines-personnel-needs-reaching-a-critical-threshold/>

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^[34] <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2023/07/28/franz-stefan-gady-and-michael-kofman-on-what-ukraine-must-do-to-break-through-russian-defences>

^[35] <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/02/us/politics/ukraine-troops-counteroffensive-training.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

^[36] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/06/16/ukraine-counteroffensive-russia-understand-strategy/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/02/us/politics/ukraine-troops-counteroffensive-training.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

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^[40] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraines-lack-of-weaponry-and-training-risks-stalemate-in-fight-with-russia-f51ecf9>

^[41] <https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/ukraine-chalks-up-small-advance-in-southern-push-8735d44c>

^[42] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraines-lack-of-weaponry-and-training-risks-stalemate-in-fight-with-russia-f51ecf9>

^[43] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/20/casualties-mount-as-ukraine-forces-inch-south-hamlet-by-hamlet>

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^[45] <https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/07/30/the-jury-is-still-out-on-ukraines-big-push-south>

For a detailed discussion of Russia's formidable defense in depth, see:

https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-06/230609_Jones_Ukraine_Operations.pdf?VersionId=50OXVua.QRT58vSgSUc99VMMbFRo3YUp

^[46]

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^[47] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-66581217>

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Ukraine's herculean efforts to try to capture Robotyne, a tiny village in the grey zone, illustrates the futility of the counteroffensive.

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[What's taking place is a "de-programming operation" aimed at reversing the effect that pro-Ukrainian/-war and anti-peace/-Russian propagaanda had on the Western masses. The purpose is to precondition them for accepting the scenario of peace talks and the resultant ceasefire that they could lead to if successful...](#)
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