Ukraine's failed counteroffensive - Miscalculations, divisions marked offensive planning by U.S., Ukraine

By Washington Post Staff - December 4, 2023

On June 15, in a conference room at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, flanked by top U.S. commanders, sat around a table with his Ukrainian counterpart, who was joined by aides from Kyiv. The room was heavy with an air of frustration.

Austin, in his deliberate baritone, asked Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov about Ukraine's decision-making in the opening days of its long-awaited counteroffensive, pressing him on why his forces weren't using Western-supplied mine-clearing equipment to enable a larger, mechanized assault, or using smoke to conceal their advances. **Despite Russia's thick defensive lines, Austin said, the Kremlin's troops weren't invincible.** **[Matthias Comments: Big Mistake By US etc]**

Part One:

Over three months, reporters in Washington, London, Brussels and Riga, Latvia, as well as in Kyiv and near the front lines in Ukraine, spoke to more than 30 senior officials from Ukraine, the United States and European nations to examine the military planning behind the counteroffensive and how that contributed to the operation failing to achieve its goals. The Post spoke to former Russian service members who had fought in the war, as well as Russian war bloggers and analysts.

Washington Post reporters, photographers, news assistants and security advisers drove hundreds of miles throughout Ukraine to speak to soldiers and government officials for this series. Journalists made numerous front-line visits in the Zaporizhzhia and Donetsk regions, including in embeds with combat units within five miles of Russian forces.

Reznikov, a bald, bespectacled lawyer, said Ukraine's military commanders were the ones making those decisions. **But he noted that Ukraine's armoured vehicles were being destroyed by Russian helicopters, drones and artillery with every attempt to advance. Without air support, he said, the only option was to use artillery to shell Russian lines, dismount from the targeted vehicles and proceed on foot.**

"We can't maneuver because of the land-mine density and tank ambushes," Reznikov said, according to an official who was present.

The meeting in Brussels, less than two weeks into the campaign, illustrates how a counteroffensive born in optimism has failed to deliver its expected punch, generating friction and second-guessing between

Washington and Kyiv and raising deeper questions about Ukraine's ability to retake decisive amounts of territory.

As winter approaches, and the front lines freeze into place, Ukraine's most senior military officials acknowledge that the war has reached a stalemate.

This examination of the lead-up to Ukraine's counteroffensive is based on interviews with more than 30 senior officials from Ukraine, the United States and European nations.

It provides new insights and previously unreported details about America's deep involvement in the military planning behind the counteroffensive and the factors that contributed to its disappointments. The second part of this two-part account examines how the battle unfolded on the ground over the summer and fall, and the widening fissures between Washington and Kyiv. Some of the officials spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive deliberations.

Key elements that shaped the counteroffensive and the initial outcome include:

● **Ukrainian, U.S. and British military officers held eight major table-top war games to build a campaign plan. But Washington miscalculated the extent to which Ukraine's forces could be transformed into a Western-style fighting force in a short period — especially without giving Kyiv air power integral to modern militaries.**

● **U.S. and Ukrainian officials sharply disagreed at times over strategy, tactics and timing. The Pentagon wanted the assault to begin in mid-April to prevent Russia from continuing to strengthen its lines. The Ukrainians hesitated, insisting they weren't ready without additional weapons and training.**

● **U.S. military officials were confident that a mechanized frontal attack on Russian lines was feasible with the troops and weapons that Ukraine had. The simulations concluded that Kyiv's forces, in the best case, could reach the Sea of Azov and cut off Russian troops in the south in 60 to 90 days.**

● **The United States advocated a focused assault along that southern axis, but Ukraine's leadership believed its forces had to attack at three distinct points along the 600-mile front, southward toward both Melitopol and Berdyansk on the Sea of Azov and east toward the embattled city of Bakhmut.**

Sources: Institute for the Study of War, AEI's Critical Threats Project

● <u>The U.S. intelligence community had a more downbeat view than the U.S. military, assessing that the offensive had only a 50-50 chance of success given the stout, multilayered defenses Russia had built up over the winter and spring.</u>

● Many in Ukraine and the West underestimated Russia's ability to rebound from battlefield disasters and exploit its perennial strengths: manpower, mines and a willingness to sacrifice lives on a scale that few other countries can countenance.

● As the expected launch of the offensive approached, Ukrainian military officials feared they would suffer catastrophic losses — while American officials believed the toll would ultimately be higher without a decisive assault.

The year began with Western resolve at its peak, Ukrainian forces highly confident and President Volodymyr Zelensky predicting a decisive victory. But now, there is uncertainty on all fronts. Morale in Ukraine is waning. International attention has been diverted to the Middle East. Even among

Ukraine's supporters, there is growing political reluctance to contribute more to a precarious cause. At almost every point along the front, expectations and results have diverged as Ukraine has shifted to a slow-moving dismounted slog that has retaken only slivers of territory.

"We wanted faster results," Zelensky said in an interview with the Associated Press last week. "From that perspective, unfortunately, we did not achieve the desired results. And this is a fact."

Together, all these factors make victory for Ukraine far less likely than years of war and destruction.

The campaign's inconclusive and discouraging early months pose sobering questions for Kyiv's Western backers about the future, as Zelensky — supported by an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians — vows to fight until Ukraine restores the borders established in its 1991 independence from the Soviet Union.

"That's going to take years and a lot of blood," a British security official said, if it's even possible. "Is Ukraine up for that? What are the manpower implications? The economic implications? Implications for Western support?"

The year now stands to end with Russian President Vladimir Putin more certain than ever that he can wait out a fickle West and fully absorb the Ukrainian territory already seized by his troops.

Gaming out the Battle Plan

In a conference call in the late fall of 2022, after Kyiv had won back territory in the north and south, Austin spoke with Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, Ukraine's top military commander, and asked him what he would need for a spring offensive. Zaluzhny responded that he required 1,000 armoured vehicles and nine new brigades, trained in Germany and ready for battle.

"I took a big gulp," Austin said later, according to an official with knowledge of the call. "That's near-impossible," he told colleagues.

In the first months of 2023, military officials from Britain, Ukraine and the United States concluded a series of war games at a U.S. Army base in Wiesbaden, Germany, where Ukrainian officers were embedded with a newly established command responsible for supporting Kyiv's fight.

The sequence of eight high-level table-top exercises formed the backbone for the U.S.-enabled effort to hone a viable, detailed campaign plan, and to determine what Western nations would need to provide to give it the means to succeed.

"We brought all the allies and partners together and really squeezed them hard to get additional mechanized vehicles," a senior U.S. defense official said.

During the simulations, each of which lasted several days, participants were designated to play the part either of Russian forces — whose capabilities and behaviour were **informed by Ukrainian and allied intelligence** — or Ukrainian troops and commanders, whose performance was bound by the reality that they would be facing serious constraints in manpower and ammunition.

The planners ran the exercises using specialized war-gaming software and Excel spread sheets — and, sometimes, simply by moving pieces around on a map. The simulations included smaller component exercises that each focused on a particular element of the fight — offensive operations or logistics. The conclusions were then fed back into the evolving campaign plan.

Top officials including Gen. Mark A. Milley, then chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrsky, commander of Ukrainian ground forces, attended several of the simulations and were briefed on the results.

During one visit to Wiesbaden, Milley spoke with Ukrainian special operations troops — who were working with American Green Berets — in the hope of inspiring them ahead of operations in enemy-controlled areas.

“There should be no Russian who goes to sleep without wondering if they’re going to get their throat slit in the middle of the night,” Milley said, according to an official with knowledge of the event. “You gotta get back there, and create a campaign behind the lines.”

Ukrainian officials hoped the offensive could re-create the success of the fall of 2022, when they recovered parts of the Kharkiv region in the northeast and the city of Kherson in the south in a campaign that surprised even Ukraine’s biggest backers. Again, their focus would be in more than one place.

But Western officials said the war games affirmed their assessment that Ukraine would be best served by concentrating its forces on a single strategic objective — a massed attack through Russian-held areas to the Sea of Azov, severing the Kremlin’s land route from Russia to Crimea, a critical supply line.

The rehearsals gave the United States the opportunity to say at several points to the Ukrainians, “I know you really, really, really want to do this, but it’s not going to work,” one former U.S. official said.

At the end of the day, though, it would be Zelensky, Zaluzhny and other Ukrainian leaders who would make the decision, the former official noted.

Officials tried to assign probabilities to different scenarios, including a Russian capitulation — deemed a “really low likelihood” — or a major Ukrainian setback that would create an opening for a major Russian counterattack — also a slim probability.

“Then what you’ve got is the reality in the middle, with degrees of success,” a British official said.

The most optimistic scenario for cutting the land bridge was 60 to 90 days. The exercises also predicted a difficult and bloody fight, with losses of soldiers and equipment as high as 30 to 40 per cent, according to U.S. officials.

Key findings from our reporting on Ukraine’s counteroffensive

The United States was deeply involved in the military planning behind the operation. Ukrainian, U.S. and British military officers held eight major table-top war games to build a campaign plan. U.S. and Ukrainian officials sharply disagreed at times over strategy, tactics and timing.

The Pentagon wanted the assault to begin in mid-April to prevent Russia from continuing to strengthen its lines. The Ukrainians hesitated, insisting they weren’t ready without additional weapons and more training. The counter offensive began in June.

U.S. military officials were confident that a mass, mechanized frontal attack along one axis in the south of Ukraine would lead to a decisive breakthrough. Ukraine attacked along three axes, believing that would stretch Russian forces. Ukraine abandoned large, mechanized assaults when it suffered serious losses in the first days of the campaign.

The war game simulations concluded that Kyiv’s forces, in the best case, could reach the Sea of Azov in the south of Ukraine and cut off Russian troops in 60 to 90 days. Ukrainian forces have advanced only about 12 miles. The Sea of Azov is still far out of reach. Ukraine’s top commander now acknowledges that the war has reached a “stalemate.” [Matthias Chang comments – pure day dreaming and fantasy]

American military officers had seen casualties come in far lower than estimated in the major battles of Iraq and Afghanistan. They considered the estimates a starting point for planning medical care and battlefield evacuation so that losses never reached the projected levels.

The numbers “can be sobering,” the senior U.S. defense official said. “But they never are as high as predicted, because we know we have to do things to make sure we don’t.”

U.S. officials also believed that more Ukrainian troops would ultimately be killed if Kyiv failed to mount a decisive assault and the conflict became a drawn-out war of attrition.

But they acknowledged the delicacy of suggesting a strategy that would entail significant losses, no matter the final figure.

“It was easy for us to tell them in a table-top exercise, ‘Okay, you’ve just got to focus on one place and push really hard,’” a senior U.S. official said. “They were going to lose a lot of people and they were going to lose a lot of the equipment.”

Those choices, the senior official said, become “much harder on the battlefield.”

On that, a senior Ukrainian military official agreed. War-gaming “doesn’t work,” the official said in retrospect, in part because of the new technology that was transforming the battlefield.

Ukrainian soldiers were fighting a war unlike anything NATO forces had experienced: a large conventional conflict, with World World I-style trenches overlaid by omnipresent drones and other futuristic tools — and without the air superiority the U.S. military has had in every modern conflict it has fought.

“All these methods … you can take them neatly and throw them away, you know?” the senior Ukrainian said of the war-game scenarios. “And throw them away because it doesn’t work like that now.”

Disagreements about deployments

The Americans had long questioned the wisdom of Kyiv’s decision to keep forces around the besieged eastern city of Bakhmut.

Ukrainians saw it differently. “Bakhmut holds” had become shorthand for pride in their troops’ fierce resistance against a bigger enemy. For months, Russian and Ukrainian artillery had pulverized the city. Soldiers killed and wounded one another by the thousands to make gains measured sometimes by city blocks.

The city finally fell to Russia in May.

Zelensky, backed by his top commander, stood firm about the need to retain a major presence around Bakhmut and strike Russian forces there as part of the counteroffensive. To that end, Zaluzhny maintained more forces near Bakhmut than he did in the south, including the country’s most experienced units, U.S. officials observed with frustration.

Ukrainian officials argued that they needed to sustain a robust fight in the Bakhmut area because otherwise Russia would try to reoccupy parts of the Kharkiv region and advance in Donetsk — a key objective for Putin, who wants to seize that whole region.

“We told [the Americans], ‘If you assumed the seats of our generals, you’d see that if we don’t make Bakhmut a point of contention, [the Russians] would,’” one senior Ukrainian official said. “We can’t let that happen.”

In addition, Zaluzhny envisioned making the formidable length of the 600-mile front a problem for Russia, according to the senior British official. The Ukrainian general wanted to stretch Russia's much larger occupying force — unfamiliar with the terrain and already facing challenges with morale and logistics — to dilute its fighting power. [Matthias Chang Comments: Daydreaming again]

Western officials saw problems with that approach, which would also diminish the firepower of Ukraine's military at any single point of attack. Western military doctrine dictated a concentrated push toward a single objective.

The Americans yielded, however.

"They know the terrain. They know the Russians," said a senior U.S. official. "It's not our war. And we had to kind of sit back into that."

Production of 155mm artillery shells in February at the Scranton Army Ammunition Plant in Pennsylvania. American production couldn't keep up with demands.

The weapons Kyiv needed

On Feb. 3, Jake Sullivan, President Biden's national security adviser, called together the administration's top national security officials to review the counteroffensive plan.

The White House's subterranean Situation Room was being renovated, so the top echelons of the State, Defense and Treasury departments, along with the CIA, gathered in a secure conference room in the adjacent Eisenhower Executive Office Building.

Most were already familiar with Ukraine's three-pronged approach. The goal was for Biden's senior advisers to voice their approval or reservations to one another and try to reach consensus on their joint advice to the president.

The questions posed by Sullivan were simple, said a person who attended. First, could Washington and its partners successfully prepare Ukraine to break through Russia's heavily fortified defenses?

And then, even if the Ukrainians were prepared, "could they actually do it?"

Milley, with his ever-ready green maps of Ukraine, displayed the potential axes of attack and the deployment of Ukrainian and Russian forces. He and Austin explained their conclusion that "Ukraine, to be successful, needed to fight a different way," one senior administration official closely involved in the planning recalled.

Ukraine's military, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, had become a defensive force. Since 2014 it had focused on a grinding but low-level fight

against Russian-backed forces in the eastern Donbas region. To orchestrate a large-scale advance would require a significant shift in its force structure and tactics.

The planning called for wider and better Western training, which up to that point had focused on teaching small groups and individuals to use Western-provided weapons. Thousands of troops would be instructed in Germany in large unit formations and U.S.-style battlefield maneuvers, whose principles dated to World War II. For American troops, training in what was known as "combined arms" operations often lasted more than a year. The Ukraine plan proposed condensing that into a few months.

[Matthias Chang comments: Planning was obsolete and useless and was proven in the actual battlefield]

Instead of firing artillery, then "inching forward" and firing some more, the Ukrainians would be "fighting and shooting at the same time," with newly trained brigades moving forward with armoured vehicles and artillery support "in a kind of symphonic way," the senior administration official said.

The Biden administration announced in early January that it would send Bradley Fighting Vehicles; Britain agreed to transfer 14 Challenger tanks. Later that month, after a grudging U.S. announcement that it would provide top-line Abrams M1 tanks by the fall, Germany and other NATO nations pledged hundreds of German-made Leopard tanks in time for the counteroffensive.

A far bigger problem was the supply of 155mm shells, which would enable Ukraine to compete with Russia's vast artillery arsenal. The Pentagon calculated that Kyiv needed 90,000 or more a month. While U.S. production was increasing, it was barely more than a tenth of that.

"It was just math," the former senior official said. "At a certain point, we just wouldn't be able to provide them."

As Ukraine flies through artillery rounds, U.S. races to keep up

Sullivan laid out options. South Korea had massive quantities of the U.S.-provided munitions, but its laws prohibited sending weapons to war zones. The Pentagon calculated that about 330,000 155mm shells could be transferred by air and sea within 41 days if Seoul could be persuaded.

Senior administration officials had been speaking with counterparts in Seoul, who were receptive as long as the provision was indirect. The shells began to flow at the beginning of the year, eventually making South Korea a larger supplier of artillery ammunition for Ukraine than all European nations combined.

The more immediate alternative would entail tapping the U.S. military's arsenal of 155mm shells that, unlike the South Korean variant, were packed with cluster munitions. The Pentagon had thousands of them, gathering dust for decades. But Secretary of State Antony Blinken balked.

Inside the warhead of those cluster weapons, known officially as Dual-Purpose Improved Conventional Munitions, or DPICMs, were dozens of bomblets that would scatter across a wide area. Some would inevitably fail to explode, posing a long-term danger to civilians, and 120 countries — including most U.S. allies but not Ukraine or Russia — had signed a treaty banning them. Sending them would cost the United States some capital on the war's moral high ground.

In the face of Blinken's strong objections, Sullivan tabled consideration of DPICMs. They would not be referred to Biden for approval, at least for now.

Can Ukraine win?

With the group agreeing that the United States and allies could provide what they believed were the supplies and training Ukraine needed, Sullivan faced the second part of the equation: Could Ukraine do it?

Zelensky, on the war's first anniversary in February, had boasted that 2023 would be a "year of victory." His intelligence chief had decreed that Ukrainians would soon be vacationing in Crimea, the peninsula that Russia had illegally annexed in 2014. But some in the U.S. government were less than confident. [Matthias Chang comments; Day dreaming again.]

U.S. intelligence officials, skeptical of the Pentagon's enthusiasm, assessed the likelihood of success at no better than 50-50. The estimate frustrated their Defense Department counterparts, especially those at U.S. European Command, who recalled the spies' erroneous prediction in the days before the 2022 invasion that Kyiv would fall to the Russians within days.

Some defense officials observed caustically that optimism was not in intelligence officials' DNA — they were the "Eeyores" of government, the former senior official said, and it was always safer to bet on failure. [Matthias Chang comments: infighting between so0called experts.]

"Part of it was just the fact of the sheer weight of the Russian military," CIA Director William J. Burns later reflected in an interview. "For all their incompetence in the first year of the war, they had managed to launch a shambolic partial mobilization to fill a lot of the gaps in the front. In Zaporizhzhia" — the key line of the counteroffensive if the land bridge was to be severed — "we could see them building really quite formidable fixed defenses, hard to penetrate, really costly, really bloody for the Ukrainians."

Perhaps more than any other senior official, Burns, a former ambassador to Russia, had travelled multiple times to Kyiv over the previous year, sometimes

in secret, to meet with his Ukrainian counterparts, as well as with Zelensky and his senior military officials. He appreciated the Ukrainians' most potent weapon — their will to fight an existential threat.

"Your heart is in it," Burns said of his hopes for helping Ukraine succeed. "But … our broader intelligence assessment was that this was going to be a really tough slog."

Two weeks after Sullivan and others briefed the president, a top-secret, updated intelligence report assessed that the challenges of massing troops, ammunition and equipment meant that Ukraine would probably fall "well short" of its counteroffensive goals.

The West had so far declined to grant Ukraine's request for fighter jets and the Army Tactical Missile System, or ATACMS, which could reach targets farther behind Russian lines, and which the Ukrainians felt they needed to strike key Russian command and supply sites.

"You are not going to go from an emerging, post-Soviet legacy military to the U.S. Army of 2023 overnight," a senior Western intelligence official said. "It is foolish for some to expect that you can give them things and it changes the way they fight."

U.S. military officials did not dispute that it would be a bloody struggle. By early 2023, they knew that as many as 130,000 Ukrainian troops had been injured or killed in the war, including many of the country's best soldiers. Some Ukrainian commanders were already expressing doubts about the coming campaign, citing the numbers of troops who lacked battlefield experience.

Yet the Pentagon had also worked closely with Ukrainian forces. Officials had watched them fight courageously and had overseen the effort to provide them with large amounts of sophisticated arms. U.S. military officials argued that the intelligence estimates failed to account for the firepower of the newly arriving weaponry, as well as the Ukrainians' will to win.

"The plan that they executed was entirely feasible with the force that they had, on the timeline that we planned out," a senior U.S. military official said.

Austin knew that additional time for training on new tactics and equipment would be beneficial but that Ukraine didn't have that luxury.

"In a perfect world, you get a choice. You keep saying, 'I want to take six more months to train up and feel comfortable about this,'" he said in an interview. "My take is that they didn't have a choice. They were in a fight for their lives."

Russia gets ready

By March, Russia was already many months into preparing its defenses, building miles upon miles of barriers, trenches and other obstacles across the front in anticipation of the Ukrainian push.

After stinging defeats in the Kharkiv region and Kherson in the fall of 2022, Russia seemed to pivot. Putin appointed Gen. Sergei Surovikin — known as "General Armageddon" for his merciless tactics in Syria — to lead Russia's fight in Ukraine, focusing on digging in rather than taking more territory.

In the months after the 2022 invasion, Russian trenches were basic — flood-prone, straight-line pits nicknamed "corpse lines," according to Ruslan Leviev, an analyst and co-founder of the Conflict Intelligence Team, which has been tracking Russian military activity in Ukraine since 2014.

But Russia adapted as the war wore on, digging drier, zigzagging trenches that better protected soldiers from shelling. As the trenches eventually grew more sophisticated, they opened up into forests to offer better means for defenders to fall back, Leviev said. The Russians built tunnels between positions to counter Ukraine's extensive use of drones, he added.

The trenches were part of multilayered defenses that included dense minefields, concrete pyramids known as dragon's teeth, and antitank ditches. If minefields were disabled, Russian forces had rocket-borne systems to reseed them.

Unlike Russia's offensive efforts early in the war, these defenses followed textbook Soviet standards. "This is one case where they have implemented their doctrine," a senior Western intelligence official said.

Konstantin Yefremov, a former officer with Russia's 42nd motorized rifle division who was stationed in Zaporizhzhia in 2022, recalled that Russia had the equipment and grunt power necessary to build a solid wall against attack.

"Putin's army is experiencing shortages of various arms, but can literally swim in mines," Yefremov said in an interview after fleeing to the West. "They have millions of them, both antitank and antipersonnel mines."

The poverty, desperation and fear of the tens of thousands of conscripted Russian soldiers made them an ideal workforce. "All you need is slave power," he said. "And even more so, Russian rank-and-file soldiers know they are [building trenches and other defenses] for themselves, to save their skin."

In addition, in a tactic used in both World War I and II, Surovikin would deploy blocking units behind the Russian troops to prevent them from retreating, sometimes under pain of death.

Their options were “either to die from our units or from their own,” said Ukrainian police Col. Oleksandr Netrebko, the commander of a newly formed police brigade fighting near Bakhmut.

Yet, while Russia had far more troops, a deeper military arsenal and what one U.S. official said was “just a willingness to endure really dramatic losses,” U.S. officials knew it also had serious vulnerabilities.

By early 2023, some 200,000 Russian soldiers had been killed or wounded, U.S. intelligence agencies estimated, including scores of highly trained commandos. Replacement troops who were rushed into Ukraine lacked experience. Turnover of field leaders had hurt command and control. Equipment losses were equally staggering: more than 2,000 tanks, some 4,000 armored fighting vehicles and at least 75 aircraft, according to a Pentagon document leaked on the Discord chat platform in the spring. **[Matthias Chang comments: no evidence to support. Again wrong assumptions in evaluation and planning].**

The assessment was that the Russian force was insufficient to protect every line of conflict. But unless Ukraine got underway quickly, the Kremlin could make up its deficits inside of a year, or less if it got more outside help from friendly nations such as Iran and North Korea.

It was imperative, U.S. officials argued, for Ukraine to launch.

More troops, more weapons

In late April, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg made an unannounced trip to see Zelensky in Kyiv.

Stoltenberg, a former Norwegian prime minister, was in town to discuss preparations for the NATO summit in July, including Kyiv’s push to join the alliance.

But over a working lunch with a handful of ministers and aides, talk turned to preparation for the counteroffensive — how things were going and what was left to be done.

Stoltenberg — due the next day in Germany for a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, a consortium of roughly 50 countries providing weaponry and other support to Kyiv — asked about efforts to equip and train Ukrainian brigades by the end of April, according to two people familiar with the talks.

Zelensky reported that the Ukrainian military expected the brigades to be at 80 or 85 percent by the end of the month, the people said. That seemed at odds with American expectations that Ukraine should already be ready to launch.

The Ukrainian leader also stressed that his troops had to hold the east to keep Russia from shifting forces to block Kyiv’s southern counteroffensive. To defend

the east while also pushing south, he said, Ukraine needed more brigades, the two people recalled.

Ukrainian officials also continued to make the case that an expanded arsenal was central to their ability to succeed. It wasn't until May, on the eve of the fight, that Britain announced it would provide longer-range Storm Shadow missiles. But another core refrain from Ukraine was that they were being asked to fight in a way no NATO nation would ever contemplate — without effective power in the air.

As one former senior Ukrainian official pointed out, his country's aging MiG-29 fighter jets could detect targets within a 40-mile radius and fire at a range of 20 miles. Russia's Su-35s, meanwhile, could identify targets more than 90 miles away and shoot them down as far away as 75 miles.

"Imagine a MiG and a Su-35 in the sky. We don't see them while they see us. We can't reach them while they can reach us," the official said. "That's why we fought so hard for F-16s."

American officials pointed out that even a few of the $60 million aircraft would eat up funds that could go much further in buying vehicles, air defenses or ammunition. Moreover, they said, the jets wouldn't provide the air superiority the Ukrainians craved.

"If you could train a bunch of F-16 pilots in three months, they would have got shot down on day one, because the Russian air defenses in Ukraine are very robust and very capable," a senior defense official said.

Biden finally yielded in May and granted the required permission for European nations to donate their U.S.-made F-16s to Ukraine. But pilot training and delivery of the jets would take a year or more, far too long to make a difference in the coming fight.

Kiev Hesitates

By May, concern was growing within the Biden administration and among allied backers. According to the planning, Ukraine should have already launched its operations. As far as the U.S. military was concerned, the window of opportunity was shrinking fast. Intelligence over the winter had shown that Russian defenses were relatively weak and largely unmanned, and that morale was low among Russian troops after their losses in Kharkiv and Kherson. U.S. intelligence assessed that senior Russian officers felt the prospects were bleak. **[Matthias Chang comments: Again and again, wrong assumptions were made].**

But that assessment was changing quickly. The goal had been to strike before Moscow was ready, and the U.S. military had been trying since mid-April to get the Ukrainians moving. "We were given dates. We were given many dates," a senior U.S. government official said. "We had April this, May that, you know, June. It just kept getting delayed."

Meanwhile, enemy defenses were thickening. U.S. military officials were dismayed to see Russian forces use those weeks in April and May to seed significant amounts of additional mines, a development the officials believed ended up making Ukrainian troops' advance substantially harder.

Washington was also getting worried that the Ukrainians were burning up too many artillery shells, primarily around Bakhmut, that were needed for the counteroffensive.

As May ground on, it seemed to the Americans that Kyiv, gung-ho during the war games and the training, had abruptly slowed down — that there was "some type of switch in psychology" where they got to the brink "and then all of a sudden they thought, 'Well, let's triple-check, make sure we're comfortable,'" said one administration official who was part of the planning. "But they were telling us for almost a month … 'We're about to go. We're about to go.'"

Some senior American officials believed there wasn't conclusive proof that the delay had altered Ukraine's chances for success. Others saw clear indications that the Kremlin had successfully exploited the interim along what it believed would be Kyiv's lines of assault.

In Ukraine, a different kind of frustration was building. "When we had a calculated timeline, yes, the plan was to start the operation in May," said a former senior Ukrainian official who was deeply involved in the effort. "However, many things happened."

Promised equipment was delivered late or arrived unfit for combat, the Ukrainians said. "A lot of weapons that are coming in now, they were relevant last year," the senior Ukrainian military official said, not for the high-tech battles ahead. Crucially, he said, they had received only 15 percent of items — like the Mine Clearing Line Charge launchers (MCLCs) — needed to execute their plan to remotely cut passages through the minefields**. [Matthias Chang comments: excuses and excuses … one main reason for defeat …. Wrong assumptions and over estimation of West and Ukraine's strengths]**

And yet, the senior Ukrainian military official recalled, the Americans were nagging about a delayed start and still complaining about how many troops Ukraine was devoting to Bakhmut.

U.S. officials vehemently denied that the Ukrainians did not get all the weaponry they were promised. Ukraine's wish list may have been far bigger, the Americans acknowledged, but by the time the offensive began, they had received nearly two dozen MCLCs, more than 40 mine rollers and excavators, 1,000 Bangalore torpedoes, and more than 80,000 smoke grenades. **Zaluzhny had requested 1,000 armoured vehicles; the Pentagon ultimately delivered 1,500.**

"They got everything they were promised, on time," one senior U.S. official said. In some cases, the officials said, Ukraine failed to deploy equipment critical to

the offensive, holding it in reserve or allocating it to units that weren't part of the assault.

Then there was the weather. The melting snow and heavy rains that turn parts of Ukraine into a soup of heavy mud each spring had come late and lasted longer than usual.

In the middle of 2022, when the thinking about a counteroffensive began, "no one knew the weather forecast," the former senior Ukrainian official said.

That meant it was unclear when the flat plains and rich black soil of south-eastern Ukraine, which could act as a glue grabbing hold of boots and tires, would dry out for summer. The Ukrainians understood the uncertainty because they, unlike the Americans, lived there.

As the preparations accelerated, Ukrainian officials' concerns grew more acute, erupting at a meeting at Ramstein Air Base in Germany in April when Zaluzhny's deputy, Mykhailo Zabrodskyi, made an emotional appeal for help.

"We're sorry, but some of the vehicles we received are unfit for combat," Zabrodskyi told Austin and his aides, according to a former senior Ukrainian official. He said the Bradleys and Leopards had broken or missing tracks. German Marder fighting vehicles lacked radio sets; they were nothing more than iron boxes with tracks — useless if they couldn't communicate with their units, he said. Ukrainian officials said the units for the counteroffensive lacked sufficient de-mining and evacuation vehicles.

Austin looked at Gen. Christopher Cavoli, the top U.S. commander for Europe, and Lt. Gen. Antonio Aguto, head of the Security Assistance Group-Ukraine, both sitting next to him. They said they'd check.

The Pentagon concluded that Ukrainian forces were failing to properly handle and maintain all the equipment after it was received. Austin directed Aguto to work more intensively with his Ukrainian counterparts on maintenance.

"Even if you deliver 1,300 vehicles that are working fine, there's going to be some that break between the time that you get them on the ground there and the time they enter combat," a senior defense official said.

By June 1, the top echelons at U.S. European Command and the Pentagon were frustrated and felt like they were getting few answers. Maybe the Ukrainians were daunted by the potential casualties? Perhaps there were political disagreements within the Ukrainian leadership, or problems along the chain of command?

The counteroffensive finally lurched into motion in early June. Some Ukrainian units quickly notched small gains, recapturing Zaporizhzhia-region villages south of Velyka Novosilka, 80 miles from the Azov coast. But elsewhere, not even Western arms and training could fully shield Ukrainian forces from the

punishing Russian firepower. [**Matthias Chang comments: These gains were irrelevant and the war objectives- all PR and BS talk]**

When troops from the 37th Reconnaissance Brigade attempted an advance, they, like units elsewhere, immediately felt the force of Russia's tactics. From the first minutes of their assault, they were overwhelmed by mortar fire that pierced their French AMX-10 RC armoured vehicles. Their own artillery fire didn't materialize as expected. Soldiers crawled out of burning vehicles. In one unit, 30 of 50 soldiers were captured, wounded or killed. Ukraine's equipment losses in the initial days included 20 Bradley Fighting Vehicles and six German-made Leopard tanks.

Those early encounters landed like a thunderbolt among the officers in Zaluzhny's command center, searing a question in their minds: Was the strategy doomed?

Ukraine's Failed Counter-Offensive.

Part Two

In Ukraine, a war of incremental gains as counteroffensive stalls

ZAPORIZHZHIA, Ukraine — Soldiers in the 47th Separate Mechanized Brigade waited for nightfall before piling — nervous but confident — into their U.S.-provided Bradley Fighting Vehicles. It was June 7 and Ukraine's long-awaited counteroffensive was about to begin.

The goal for the first 24 hours was to advance nearly nine miles, reaching the village of Robotyne — an initial thrust south toward the larger objective of reclaiming Melitopol, a city near the Sea of Azov, and severing Russian supply lines.

Nothing went as planned.

Over three months, reporters in Washington, London, Brussels and Riga, Latvia, as well as in Kyiv and near the front lines in Ukraine, spoke to dozens of Ukrainian officers and troops and over 30 senior officials from Ukraine, the United States and European nations to examine how the counteroffensive unfolded on the ground, and the widening fissures between Kyiv and Washington. The Post spoke to former Russian service members who fought in the war, as well as Russian war bloggers and analysts.

Washington Post reporters, photographers, news assistants and security advisers drove hundreds of miles throughout Ukraine to speak to soldiers and government officials for this series. Journalists made numerous front-line visits in the Zaporizhzhia and Donetsk regions, including in embeds with combat units within five miles of Russian forces.

The Ukrainian troops had expected minefields but were blindsided by the density. The ground was carpeted with explosives, so many that some were buried in stacks. The soldiers had been trained to drive their Bradleys at a facility in Germany, on smooth terrain. But on the mushy soil of the Zaporizhzhia region, in the deafening noise of battle, they struggled to steer through the narrow lanes cleared of mines by advance units.

The Russians, positioned on higher ground, immediately started firing antitank missiles. Some vehicles in the convoy were hit, forcing others behind them to veer off the path. Those, in turn, exploded on mines, snarling even more of the convoy. Russian helicopters and drones swooped in and attacked the pileup.

Troops, some experiencing the shock of combat for the first time, pulled back to regroup — only to attack and retreat, again and again on successive days, with the same bloody results.

"It was hellfire," said Oleh Sentsov, a platoon commander in the 47th.

By day four, Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, Ukraine's top commander, had seen enough. Incinerated Western military hardware — American Bradleys, German Leopard tanks, mine-sweeping vehicles — littered the battlefield. The numbers of dead and wounded sapped morale.

The plan to take Robotyne

Ukraine's push to retake Robotyne at the start of the counteroffensive comprised two goals: On the first day, to advance to the northern edge of the town, and by the fourth day, to control the entire community and territory farther south. Because of extensive minefields and fortifications built by the Russians, the operation ultimately took 12 weeks to achieve.

Zaluzhny told his troops to pause their assaults before any more of Ukraine's limited weaponry was obliterated, a senior Ukrainian military official said.

Rather than try to breach Russian defenses with a massed, mechanized attack and supporting artillery fire, as his American counterparts had advised, Zaluzhny decided that Ukrainian soldiers would go on foot in small groups of about 10 — a process that would save equipment and lives but would be much slower.

Months of planning with the United States was tossed aside on that fourth day, and the already delayed counteroffensive, designed to reach the Sea of Azov within two to three months, ground to a near-halt. Rather than making a nine-mile breakthrough on their first day, the Ukrainians in the nearly six months since June have advanced about 12 miles and liberated a handful of villages. Melitopol is still far out of reach.

This account of how the counteroffensive unfolded is the second in a two-part series and illuminates the brutal and often futile attempts to breach Russian lines, as well as the widening rift between Ukrainian and U.S. commanders over tactics and strategy. The first article examined the Ukrainian and U.S. planning that went into the operation.

This second part is based on interviews with more than 30 senior Ukrainian and U.S. military officials, as well as over two dozen officers and troops on the front line. Some officials and soldiers spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe military operations.

Key findings from reporting on the campaign include:

- **Seventy percent of troops in one of the brigades leading the counteroffensive, and equipped with the newest Western weapons, entered battle with no combat experience.**

- **Ukraine's setbacks on the battlefield led to rifts with the United States over how best to cut through deep Russian defenses.**

- **The commander of U.S. forces in Europe couldn't get in touch with Ukraine's top commander for weeks in the early part of the campaign amid tension over the American's second-guessing of battlefield decisions.**

- **Each side blamed the other for mistakes or miscalculations. U.S. military officials concluded that Ukraine had fallen short in basic military tactics, including the use of ground reconnaissance to understand the density of minefields. Ukrainian officials said the Americans didn't seem to comprehend how attack drones and other technology had transformed the battlefield.**

- **In all, Ukraine has retaken only about 200 square miles of territory, at a cost of thousands of dead and wounded and billions in Western military aid in 2023 alone.**

Nearly six months after the counteroffensive began, the campaign has become a war of incremental gains. Damp World War I-style trenches lace eastern and southern Ukraine as surveillance and attack drones crowd the skies overhead. Moscow launches missile assaults on civilian targets in Ukrainian cities, while Kyiv is using both Western missiles and home-grown technology to strike far behind the front lines — in Moscow, in Crimea and on the Black Sea.

Ukrainian spies with deep ties to CIA wage shadow war against Russia

But the territorial lines of June 2023 have barely changed. And Russian President Vladimir Putin — in contrast to the silence he often maintained in the first year of the war — trumpets at every opportunity what he calls

the counteroffensive's failure. "As for the counteroffensive, which is allegedly stalling, it has failed completely," Putin said in October.

Training for battle

On Jan. 16, five months before the start of Ukraine's counteroffensive, Gen. Mark A. Milley, then chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited soldiers with the 47th, just days after the unit arrived at the Grafenwoehr Training Area in Germany.

Milley, trailed by staff and senior military officials based in Europe, zigzagged across a muddy, chilly training range, bantering with Ukrainian soldiers and watching as they fired on stationary targets with rifles and M240B machine guns.

The installation had been used to train small groups of Ukrainian soldiers since 2014, when Russia invaded and illegally annexed Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula. In anticipation of the counteroffensive, the effort was scaled up with one or more battalions of about 600 Ukrainian soldiers cycling through at a time.

In a white field tent, Milley gathered with U.S. soldiers overseeing the training, who told him they were trying to replicate Russian tactics and build some of the trenches and other obstacles the Ukrainians would face in battle.

Key findings from our reporting on Ukraine's counteroffensive

The United States was deeply involved in the military planning behind the operation. Ukrainian, U.S. and British military officers held eight major table-top war games to build a campaign plan.

U.S. and Ukrainian officials sharply disagreed at times over strategy, tactics and timing.

The Pentagon wanted the assault to begin in mid-April to prevent Russia from continuing to strengthen its lines. The Ukrainians hesitated, insisting they weren't ready without additional weapons and more training. The counteroffensive began in June.

U.S. military officials were confident that a mass, mechanized frontal attack along one axis in the south of Ukraine would lead to a decisive breakthrough. Ukraine attacked along three axes, believing that would stretch Russian forces. Ukraine abandoned large, mechanized assaults when it suffered serious losses in the first days of the campaign.

The war game simulations concluded that Kyiv's forces, in the best case, could reach the Sea of Azov in the south of Ukraine and cut off Russian troops in 60 to 90 days. Ukrainian forces have advanced only about 12 miles. The Sea of Azov is still far out of reach. Ukraine's top commander now acknowledges that the war has reached a "stalemate."

“The whole thing … for them to be successful with the Russians is for them to be able to both fire and maneuver,” Milley said, describing in basic terms the essence of the counteroffensive’s “combined arms” strategy, which called for coordinated maneuvers by a massed force of infantry, tanks, armoured vehicles, engineers and artillery. If this were the United States or NATO, the operation also would have included devastating air power to weaken the enemy and protect troops on the ground, but the Ukrainians would have to make do with little or none.

The 47th had been selected to be a “breach force” at the tip of the counteroffensive and would be equipped with Western arms. But as Milley made his rounds and chatted with Ukrainian soldiers — from young men in their 20s to middle-aged recruits — many they told him that they had only recently left civilian life and had no combat experience.

Milley kept silent. But later, in the meeting with U.S. trainers, he seemed to acknowledge the scale of the task ahead. “Give them everything you’ve got here,” he said.

The 47th was a newly created unit tabbed for the training in Germany. Ukraine’s military leadership had decided that more-experienced brigades would hold off the Russians during the winter, while fresh soldiers would form new brigades, receive training abroad and then lead the fight in the spring and summer. More than a year of war — with up to 130,000 troops dead or wounded, according to Western estimates — had taken a heavy toll on Ukraine’s armed forces. Even the most battle-hardened brigades were now largely composed of drafted replacements.

About 70 per cent of the soldiers in the 47th didn’t have any battlefield experience, according to one senior commander in the brigade.

The 47th’s leadership was also strikingly young — its commander, though combat-hardened, was just 28 years old and his deputy was 25. Their youth had been billed as an advantage; young officers would absorb NATO tactics unaffected by the Soviet way of war that still infused parts of the Ukrainian military.

Some of the Ukrainian soldiers thought the American trainers didn’t grasp the scale of the conflict against a more powerful enemy. “The presence of a huge number of drones, fortifications, minefields and so on were not taken into account,” said a soldier in the 47th with the call sign Joker. Ukrainian soldiers brought their own drones to help hone their skills, he said, but trainers initially rebuffed the request to integrate them because the training programs were predetermined. Drone use was later added following Ukrainian feedback, a U.S. official said.

The U.S. program had benefits, Joker said, including advanced cold-weather training and how to adjust artillery fire. But much was discarded once real

bullets flew. “We had to improve tactics during the battle itself,” he said. “We couldn’t use it the way we were taught.”

U.S. and Ukrainian officials said they never expected that two months of training would transform these troops into a NATO-like force. Instead, the intention was to teach them to properly use their new Western tanks and fighting vehicles and “make them literate in the basics of firing and moving,” a U.S. senior military official said.

No order to attack

When soldiers from the 47th returned to Ukraine in the spring, they expected the counteroffensive to start almost immediately. In early May, the brigade relocated closer to the front line, hiding their Bradleys and other Western equipment in the tree lines of rural Zaporizhzhia. The 47th’s insignia on vehicles was covered up in case locals sympathetic to Russia might reveal their location.

But weeks passed with no order to attack. Many in the unit felt the element of surprise had been lost. The political leadership “shouldn’t have been announcing our counteroffensive for almost a year,” said one unit commander in the 47th. “The enemy knew where we’d be coming from.”

Milley and other senior U.S. military officers involved in planning the offensive argued for the Ukrainians to mass forces at one key spot in Zaporizhzhia, to help them overcome stiff Russian defenses and ensure a successful breakthrough in the drive to Melitopol and the Sea of Azov. The Ukrainian plan, however, was to push on three axes — south along two distinct paths to the Sea of Azov, as well as in eastern Ukraine around the besieged city of Bakhmut, which the Russians had seized in the spring after a nearly year-long battle.

Ukrainian military leaders decided that committing too many troops to one point in the south would leave forces in the east vulnerable.

To split the Russian forces in Zaporizhzhia, Ukrainian marine brigades at the western edge of the neighboring Donetsk region would push south toward the coastal city of Berdyansk. That left the 47th and other brigades, part of what Ukraine referred to as its 9th Corps, to attack along the counteroffensive’s main axis, toward Melitopol.

The plan called for the 47th, and the 9th Corps, to breach the first Russian line of defense and take Robotyne. Then the 10th Corps, made up of Ukraine’s paratroopers, would join the fight in a second wave pushing south.

“We thought it was going to be a simple two-day task” to take Robotyne, said the commander of a Bradley Fighting Vehicle who goes by the call sign Frenchman.

Mining all approaches

Days after the counteroffensive launched, Oleksandr Sak, then the 47th's commander, visited a Russian position his troops had captured. He noted anti-drone guns, thermal imagery scopes and small surveillance drones, among other abandoned materiel. "I realized the enemy had prepared," he said. "We didn't catch them off-guard; they knew we were coming."

Also left behind were posters with Russian propaganda. One showed an image of men kissing in public with a red "X" over it, next to an image of a man and woman with two children. "Fighting for traditional families," the poster said.

Sak also found a map that the Russians had used to mark their minefields. For just one part of the front — about four miles long and four miles deep — more than 20,000 mines were listed.

Ukraine is now the most mined country. It will take decades to make safe.

"I wouldn't say it was unexpected, but we underestimated it," Sak said. "We conducted engineering and aerial reconnaissance, but many mines were masked or buried. In addition to those by the front line, there were mines deeper into enemy positions. We passed enemy positions and encountered more mines where we thought there were none anymore."

A chief drone sergeant in the 47th said that only on foot did they find remote-detonation traps, describing their discovery as a "surprise."

U.S. military officials believed that Ukraine could have made a more significant advance by embracing greater use of ground reconnaissance units and reducing its reliance on imagery from drones, which weren't able to detect buried mines, tripwires or booby traps.

The Zaporizhzhia region is largely composed of flat, open fields, and the Russians had chosen what high ground there was to build key defenses. From there, soldiers and officials said, Russian units armed with antitank missiles waited for convoys of Bradley Fighting Vehicles and German Leopard tanks. A mine-clearing vehicle always led the pack — and was targeted first with the help of reconnaissance drones.

"We constantly faced antitank fire and destroyed up to 10 Russian antitank guided missile systems per day," Sak said. But, he added, "day after day, they pulled in more" of the systems.

Some 60 pecent of Ukraine's de-mining equipment was damaged or destroyed in the first days, according to a senior Ukrainian defense official. "Our partners' reliance on armoured maneuver and a breakthrough didn't work," the official said. "We had to change tactics."

Within a week of the start of the counteroffensive, teams of sappers would work in twilight hours, when it was light enough for them to de-mine by hand but not so bright that the Russians could spot them. Once they cleared a small pathway, infantry would follow — a slow, grueling advance one wood line at a time.

Often, when Ukrainian soldiers reached a Russian outpost, they would find that it too had been booby-trapped with mines. And rather than withdraw, Russian forces held their positions even under heavy artillery bombardment, meaning the Ukrainians would have to engage in close combat with small arms to advance.

Throughout the Zaporizhzhia region, the Russians had deployed new units, called "Storm Z," with fighters recruited from prisons. The former inmates attacked in human waves called "meat assaults" and were used to preserve more-elite forces. Around Robotyne — the village the 47th was supposed to reach on the first day of the counteroffensive — they were mixed in with Russia's 810th Guards Naval Infantry Brigade and other regular army formations.

"Robotyne was one of the toughest assignments," a member of the 810th engineering unit said in an interview with a pro-war Russian blogger. "We had to go all out to prevent the enemy from breaking through. As sappers and engineers, we had to mine all approaches both for infantry and their vehicles.

"The famous Leopards are burning, and we tried to make sure they burn bright."

Fleets of drones

Early in the assault on Robotyne, a Russian machine-gun nest carved into a building was preventing Ukrainian infantry from advancing. A drone company within the 47th sent up two modified racing drones strapped with explosives. One glided through a window and exploded. Another, guided by a pilot with the call sign Sapsan, spiraled into another room and detonated the ammunition inside, he said, also killing several enemy soldiers.

It was an early high point in the use of small drones like pinpoint artillery. Drone operators — wearing a headset that receives a video feed from the drone in real time — hunted for armoured vehicles using first-person-view drones, known as FPVs. FPVs are so precise and fast that they can target the weak parts of vehicles, such as engine compartments and tracks, operators say.

But Russia is also deploying fleets of the same hand-built attack drones, which cost less than $1000 each and can disable a multimillion-dollar tank. Unlike artillery ammunition, which is a precious resource for both Russia and Ukraine, the low-cost, disposable FPV drones can be used to

hit small groups of infantry — navigated directly into trenches or into troops on the move.

Evacuating the wounded or bringing fresh supplies to a front-line position also became harrowing and potentially deadly tasks, often saved for night time because of the threat of drones.

“At first, our problem was mines. Now, it’s FPV drones,” said Sentsov, the platoon commander in the 47th. “They hit the target precisely and deal serious damage. They can disable a Bradley and potentially even blow it up. It’s not a direct explosion, but they can hit it in a way to make it burn — not only stop the vehicle but destroy it.”

U.S. military officials, drawing on their own doctrine, called for artillery to be used to suppress the enemy while mechanized ground forces advanced toward their objective.

“You’ve got to move while you’re firing the artillery,” a senior U.S. defense official said. “That sounds very fundamental, and it is, but that’s how you’ve got to fight. Otherwise, you can’t sustain the quantity of artillery and munitions that you need.”

But Ukrainian officials have said the ubiquity and lethality of different types of drones on both sides of the front line has been the biggest factor preventing the Ukrainians or the Russians from gaining significant ground for months.

“Because of the technical development, everything came to a standstill,” a high-ranking Ukrainian military official said. “The equipment that appears on the battlefield lives for a minute at the most.”

Chaotic battlefield conditions

The 47th claimed the liberation of Robotyne on Aug. 28. Air assault units in Ukraine’s 10th Corps then moved in, but have been unable to liberate any other villages.

The front line has also grown static along the parallel drive in the south, where Ukrainian marines led the push toward the Azov Sea city of Berdyansk. After retaking the villages of Staromaiorske and Urozhaine in July and August, there have been no further gains, leaving Ukrainian forces far from both Berdyansk and Melitopol.

Throughout the summer, some of the fiercest fighting took place in a few square miles outside the eastern city of Bakhmut, along the third axis of the counteroffensive. Ukrainian war planners saw regaining control of the tiny village of Klishchiivka as key to attaining firing superiority around the southern edges of the city and disrupting Russian supply routes.

In July, police officers belonging to the newly formed Lyut, or “Fury,” Brigade — one of the brigades created last winter ahead of the counteroffensive —

were deployed to the area. The brigade, made up of a mix of experienced police officers and recruits, was tasked with storming Russian positions in Klishchiivka, largely using gunfire and grenades.

Video footage of the Lyut Brigade's operations, which was provided to The Washington Post, and interviews with officers who participated in the fighting reveal the intense and at times chaotic battlefield conditions.

In one bodycam video, from September, soldiers weave in and out of the ruins of homes as heavy shelling booms around them. Moving from one bombed-out house to another, the Ukrainian forces search the wreckage for any remaining Russian troops — screaming out for them to surrender before lobbing grenades into basements.

Days later, on Sept. 17, Ukraine announced that it had retaken Klishchiivka. But its recapture has not moved the lines around Bakhmut in any significant way since.

"Klishchiivka is actually a cemetery of equipment and Russian troops," said the Lyut Brigade's commander, police Col. Oleksandr Netrebko. But he also conceded: "Every square meter of liberated land is covered with the blood of our men."

Frustration builds

With no big breakthrough, U.S. officials became increasingly agitated over the summer that Ukraine was not dedicating enough forces to one of the southern axes, given the American view of its strategic value.

In the north and the east, Gen. Oleksandr Syrsky controlled half of Ukraine's brigades, which ran from Kharkiv through Bakhmut down to Donetsk. Meanwhile, Gen. Oleksandr Tarnavsky controlled the other half of active brigades, fighting along the two main axes in the south.

U.S. officials viewed the roughly 50-50 split of Ukrainian forces as the wrong mix and wanted more forces shifted to the south. "Of course the enemy is going to try to destroy your mine-clearing vehicles," the senior U.S. military official said, adding that there were methods to camouflage them, including the use of smoke.

But assessing Kyiv's approach and urging changes was a delicate task. One officer who did so was Gen. Christopher Cavoli, who as head of the U.S. European Command oversaw much of the Pentagon's effort to train and equip Ukraine's army. Milley, by contrast, often struck a more optimistic, motivational tone.

As partners in Ukraine's fight for survival, two generals forged a bond

Cavoli, however, couldn't reach Zaluzhny during part of the summer, a critical phase of the counteroffensive, three people familiar with the matter said.

Cavoli declined to comment on the issue. A senior Ukrainian official noted that Zaluzhny spoke to Milley, his direct counterpart, throughout the campaign.

By August, Milley too had begun to air some frustration. He “started saying to Zaluzhny: ‘What are you doing?’” a senior Biden administration official said.

The Ukrainians were insistent that the West simply wasn’t giving them the air power and other weapons needed for a combined arms strategy to succeed. “You want us to to proceed with the counteroffensive, you want us to show the brilliant advances on the front line,” said Olha Stefanishyna, deputy prime minister for European and Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine. “But we do not have the fighter jets, meaning that you want us to throw our soldiers, you know, and accept the very fact that we cannot protect them.”

When allies said no, she said, “we heard ... ‘We are fine that your soldiers will be dying without support from the sky.’”

In an August video conference, soon followed by an in-person meeting near the Poland-Ukraine border, U.S. military officials pressed their case. They said they understood the logic of preoccupying Russian forces at different points on the front, but argued that deep advances would not come unless the Ukrainians massed more forces at a single point to move quickly and decisively.

Zaluzhny, in response, laid out the challenges in stark terms: no air cover, more mines than expected**,** and a Russian force that was impressively dug in and moving its reserves around effectively to plug gaps.

“I would not characterize that meeting as a ‘come to Jesus’ meeting and some massive drama — go left, go right,” Milley said in an interview. “I wouldn’t say that. I would say this is the normal course of business where professional leaders … routinely meet to assess the situation and adjustments going on, on the ground.”

In July, as Ukraine ran low on artillery shells and the counteroffensive faltered, the Biden administration shifted position on providing Ukraine with artillery cluster munitions, with the president overruling State Department concerns that the reputational risks were too high given the weapon’s history of killing or wounding civilians. The final key decision on weapons transfers came in September, when the administration agreed to provide a variant of the Army Tactical Missile System, known as ATACMS. The missiles were not the deep-strike variant Kyiv had requested, with the United States instead opting for a shorter-range weapon that drops cluster submunitions.

The moral dilemma of sending cluster munitions to Ukraine

While useful, Ukrainian officials said, neither the ATACMS launchers nor the cluster weapons have broken the battlefield deadlock.

Nor have other strategies. Throughout the counteroffensive, Ukraine has continued striking far behind enemy lines in an effort to weaken Russian forces and sow panic within Russian society. Kyiv isn't permitted to use Western weapons for strikes on Russia, so a fleet of homegrown drones have been used instead. Some have been able to reach targets in Moscow, while others have damaged Russian oil depots along the Black Sea. Naval drones have also successfully hit ships in Russia's Black Sea Fleet.

Ukraine has recently gained ground in the southern Kherson region, establishing troop positions on the eastern bank of the Dneiper River, but it's unclear how much weaponry — artillery especially — has been moved across the river to threaten Russian supply lines stemming from Crimea.

Ukraine has stopped asking for more tanks and fighting vehicles, despite intensely lobbying for them throughout the first year of the war.

"A lot of the weapons," a high-ranking Ukrainian military official said, "they were relevant last year."

Frozen lines

In late September, in a meeting with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was asked why his military continued to commit so many forces to the east rather than the south. Zelensky said that if the Russians lost the east, they would lose the war, according to a person familiar with the conversation.

Zelensky acknowledged differing views among some of his commanders, the person said. But most senior Ukrainian military officials continued to believe that throwing more troops at one part of the front would not force a breakthrough.

Then in mid-October, the Russians tried just that in a fierce assault on the eastern Ukrainian town of Avdiivka, which sits in a geographically strategic pocket close to the Russian-occupied city of Donetsk. Now it was the Russians on the offensive, with four brigades moving in columns of tanks and personnel carriers, and descending on one narrow strip of the front.

Engineering vehicles with mine sweepers led the charge. It was exactly how the Ukrainians had started their counteroffensive. And similarly, the Russians suffered severe losses — Ukrainian officials claimed that more than 4,000 Russian troops were killed in the first three weeks of the assault — before switching to a dismounted approach, just as the Ukrainians had done.

In early October, the 47th Brigade, after a brief respite from the fighting, was rotated back into the counteroffensive. Zelensky had publicly vowed that Ukraine would continue its push through the winter, when the weather would make any advances even more difficult.

By the end of October, however, the troops of the 47th were suddenly moved east, to defend the northern flank of Avdiivka. The brigade's Western weapons — German Leopard tanks and American Bradley Fighting Vehicles — went with them.

The relocation to Avdiivka was a surprise for the brigade, but it was also a signal that the operation in Zaporizhzhia was frozen along largely fixed lines. And behind their lines, the Russians had continued to build defensive fortifications over the summer and fall, according to satellite imagery. Around the village of Romanivske, southeast of Robotyne, antitank ditches and concrete pyramids were installed three-deep to blunt any further Ukrainian attempts to advance.

On Nov. 1, in an interview with the Economist, Zaluzhny acknowledged what had been previously unutterable — the war had reached "a stalemate."

"There will most likely, he said, "be no deep and beautiful breakthrough."