

Fighting on Two Fronts

The European War Spreads into Russia

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“Every day, every meter is given by blood.”

– General Valerii Zaluzhny,
Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine,
30 June 2023

June 2023 was eventful in relation to the war in Europe. The long-expected Ukrainian counteroffensive had started earlier in the month. Three weeks later, Wagner Corps units left the war zone and undertook a (failed) march towards Moscow in mutiny, which shocked Russia. The outgoing metastasis of the conflict continued to destabilize the security environment in other parts of Europe and beyond it. Against that background, the war approaches its symbolic 500-day mark (8 July 2023).

As the largest battle in Europe since 1945 unfolds these days, this IDD Analytical Policy Brief examines the course of action of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. Beyond that, it focuses on the Wagner turmoil and its pending impact on Russia’s internal stability and the war effort. In addition, the paper addresses broader politico-military aspects of the European War as these impact upon global security.

Counteroffensive: Fire, Iron, Blood, and Will

As forecasted in a previous [IDD Analytical Policy Brief](#), the Ukrainian Armed Forces (ZSU) started their summer counteroffensive campaign with deceptive moves. To that end, the Ukrainian command committed into combat for the first time ever its Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK)—an armed outfit opposed to the Russian government consisting of adherents of the far-right political trend, defectors, and former prisoners of war. On 22

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May 2023, those elements, supported by ZSU artillery fire, crossed the interstate border and invaded the territory of Russia in the area of Belgorod. This feint caught the Russian side off-guard; the response came with delay and was loosely organized. The fragmented fighting continued until 3 June 2023, when the collaborator outfits retreated back to Ukrainian territory largely intact. The foray of the RDK into Russia delivered a prestige blow and has increased security paranoia in Moscow. At the same time, the ZSU started another diversionary attack near the ill-fated town of Bakhmut, which had finally been taken by a Wagner mercenary assault corps after ten months of fighting and then handed over to regular Russian army units shortly before.

It is hard to establish the exact start date of the main ZSU counteroffensive, due to the information blanket imposed by its command for operational security reasons. Most likely, it kicked-off on 4 June 2023 in three directions of the southern (Zaporizhzhia) front. One indicator pointing to that date became the destruction of the Kakhovka dam on the Dnieper River the next night (5-6 June 2023). The ruined construction released massive amounts of water from its artificial reservoir, causing a major manmade disaster in a large area downstream. Although both sides deny their responsibility and blame each other, what is not contested is the fact that the dam was under Russian control at the time of the explosion. That fact and the related evidence could suggest the deliberate demolition of the dam to upset the potential Ukrainian advance from that axis (an alike logic motivated Saddam Hussein to set fire to Kuwaiti oil wells during the Iraqi retreat from that country in 1991). Oddly, that act led to unintended collateral damage, as Russia's first defensive line in that sector was flooded too.

The counteroffensive represents an enormous challenge for the ZSU. The attacking side has to penetrate three defense lines, heavily fortified by the Russian army in the previous months. The forward operation area consists of minefields, intersected by trenches, ditches, and other engineering obstacles. Each village or hedgerow has been converted into a stronghold. The fact that close air support has been minimal is another challenge (this is due to a lack of combat aircraft and the delay of promised Western machines). The latter facet resembles the second half of the Iran-Iraq War, when the Iranian forces that attacked Iraq's fortified defensive lines were underequipped, yet motivated. Nature also plays its part: the counteroffensive has been complicated due to unusually frequent rains.

Under such conditions, the Ukrainian command does its best, not committing its forces to an all-out "meat assault" (an expression used by Wagner's stormtroopers). It probes attacking in selected sectors, using bridge-layers, engineer tanks, explosive line charges, and other mine-clearing equipment to open avenues of advance. This is the most complex and bloody stage, as enemy landmines, loitering munitions, and anti-tank missiles (launched by ground crews and helicopters) cause serious losses in Ukrainian personnel and equipment. Meanwhile, the ZSU's artillery multiple-launch rocket systems, as well as its few available jet fighters, systematically deliver precise strikes against Russian artillery and air defense assets and command posts and logistics

in order to isolate the battlefield. That part of Ukraine's operational design seems to be developing quite successfully: the ZSU can wipe out up to 30 Russian artillery pieces in a single given day. Such strikes disorganize the adversary's fire support and supply system. Apparently, attacking in several areas, the ZSU command tries to distract and consume Russian operational reserves, having identified soft entry points in Russia's defense lines. The main Ukrainian reserves (trained and equipped by its Western partners) are not engaged in the battle yet, waiting until the line is breached.

The defending Russian units still endure in most points, sustaining the counterbattery fire and counterattacking, in contrast to the previous period of the war. Still, the Ukrainian infantry prevails in close-quarter combat due to superior training, night-vision equipment, and higher motivation. The increase in the number of Russian prisoners of war in the past weeks is noteworthy. The Russian forces' morale appears to be in decline: between February and June 2023, the number of deserters and absentees without leave in only the elite Russian airborne troops (VDV) reached 325.

Suffice it also to note that the certain part of the Russian operational grouping in the southern front consists of units from the North Caucasus region (i.e., North Ossetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan) that are composed of a significant percentage of non-ethnic Russians. The resulting increase in the number of funerals could contribute to a destabilization of the situation there.

Overall, the Ukrainian forces operating on the southern front were able to establish control over some 150 sq. km of fortified terrain and capture eight settlements (more than Russia achieved in the ten previous months). They were also able to get close to the main enemy defense line in three prongs. However, the line of contact has not yet changed significantly. Currently, ZSU units are backfilling and regrouping in order to resume attacks after an operational pause. Beyond that, Ukraine's special forces groups have crossed the Dnieper River and established a foothold opposite to the city of Kherson, on the Russian-held left bank. In the area of Bakhmut, the Ukrainian advance is leading to a gradual flanking that seems to be enveloping the defending Russian units.

All in all, the first month of Ukraine's counteroffensive did not produce spectacular operational effects, only tactical gains. Yet, it is hard to expect prompt results, given the starting conditions, and it is premature to draw general conclusions, as the attacking side has not committed into action even a quarter of its present capabilities, as reported. If the ZSU breaks through the Russian defense in the south, it can effectively isolate the Crimean Peninsula and turn it into an "island." That would be a victory on a strategic scale. But this is indeed a very big "if."

Meanwhile, Russian propaganda and psychological operations centers exploit the refrain of the failed counteroffensive, focusing specifically on destroyed West-supplied military hardware. Pictures of a single destroyed Leopard 2 main battle tank or Bradley armored fighting vehicle, taken from dozens of different angles, flooded the public domain

as soon as events allowed. Western media have also started to spread a pessimistic narrative of the faltering campaign, in pursuit of “hype stories.” This is a good example of the proverbial “CNN effect” in action: just one month ago, the same Western media outlets were championing overblown expectations of the pre-advertised counterstrike. That change of mood has had no noticeable political outcomes—at least so far; yet it may attain a cumulative effect in the next months.

Other Operations: Air, Sea, and Subversive Warfare

The Russian Air Force and Navy have sustained their pressure on Ukraine’s strategic rear, including the capital. In June only, 193 missiles of five different types and 197 Shahed-type kamikaze drones were launched on targets, with reports indicating that 90 percent of them were successfully destroyed by Ukrainian air defense systems. Despite the high intercept ratio, those strikes pin the most effective West-made air defense systems around the major cities, while they are essential in the battle zone to provide cover for advancing ZSU ground troops.

The Ukrainian Air Force, in turn, delivers successful strikes with the use of UK-supplied Storm Shadow cruise missiles on logistics nodes in the Russian rear. One such strike destroyed the strategic bridge connecting Crimea with the theatre of operations, affecting the supply route. Harassing drones on the Ukrainian side continue to penetrate deep into Russian airspace, once even reaching a suburban area of Moscow where some of the top elite’s quarters are located.

On the Black Sea, Ukrainian uncrewed surface boats laden with explosives conducted unsuccessful attacks on two Russian Navy’s intelligence gathering vessels operating in the vicinity of the Bosphorus Strait. Those vessels were presumably deployed there in order to protect the TurkStream underwater gas pipeline from a subversive attack akin to the NordStream diversion in the Baltic Sea in September 2022.

The “shadow war” goes on, too. The operatives allegedly tied to the aforementioned Russian Volunteer Corps and the elusive Crimean-Tatar movement “Atesh” (The Fire) have continued their subversive campaign in Russian territory against railways heading towards Ukraine. Beyond that, on 6 June 2023, unknown saboteurs blew up the Tolyatti-Odessa ammonia pipeline, which was an essential component of the UN-supervised and Türkiye-brokered grain deal.

Russian Turmoil: Orchestra’s Last Opera

As forecasted in a previous [IDD Analytical Policy Brief](#), the rise of empowered sub-state autonomous warfighting entities finally backfired on Russia. On 23-24 June 2023, outfits of the Wagner assault corps (informally referred to as “The Orchestra”) mutinied upon the rumors of its incorporation into the military structures of the Russian

Defense Ministry. In a spectacular 24-hours standoff, the rebel force seized the Southern Strategic Command's Headquarters in Rostov-on-Don and undertook a forced march towards Moscow, shooting down several Air Force helicopters and an airborne command post along the way. However, short of reaching their target, Wagner's leader Yevgeny Prigozhin ordered his subordinates to stand down.

The "Orchestra's" mutiny was something between an improvisation and a carefully planned action, in which Wagner performed as an "icebreaker." Prigozhin's conflict with the top military command is just the tip of the iceberg. The root causes are to be found in the elite's crumbling consensus and the escalating competition for power and shrinking resources between different groups within the existing political construction.

The mutiny was a crash test for the system that it all but aborted. The initial leadership paralysis and incompetence of the state agencies demonstrated the failure of crisis management. The internal power balance is crumbling, as the regular military (the Defense Ministry and the General Staff of the Armed Forces) have been left discredited and weakened, while the regime-protecting agencies (the FSB and the National Guard) have been furthered strengthened. Russia has lost its most effective warfighting tool, as the Wagner Corps' detachments now have to disband, migrate, incorporate themselves into the regular army, or go out to pasture.

Although the mutiny was quelled in short order, it opened another stage. The "home front" emerges in addition to the external one. Now, it seems that the leadership in the Kremlin needs to prioritize its preferences—if, that is, it has learned the historical lessons of February 1917: preservation of power is, after all, always a *sine qua non* for those in charge.

Ripple Effects: Nukes, Drills, and Condottiere

The lingering war aggravates its negative impact on global security. Two disproportionate politico-military coalitions have de facto emerged. The first one consists of 50+ Western states and their allies that actively support Ukraine. In June, the U.S. announced its 41st multi-billion dollar military aid package to Kiev, as did Germany, Denmark, Sweden, France, Australia, Norway, and Canada. The delivery of F16 jet fighters is just a matter of time.

Another coalition includes Russia, Belarus, Iran, and perhaps North Korea. Moscow's military cooperation with Minsk and Tehran has reached the strategic level. There is also increasing evidence that China is tacitly supplying Russia with military-grade materiel.

The war has sent the strategic arms control and non-proliferation regimes to oblivion. Russia has transferred a part of its nuclear arsenal to Belarussian command authority, which immediately prompted Poland's request to the United States for that NATO ally to deploy its own nuclear weapons on its territory. The Russian politicum and TV talking

heads are increasingly threatening the possibility of the use of (tactical) nuclear weapons in the war (according to polls, 16 percent of Russian citizens would support such a decision). The West reacts, not surprisingly. In June 2023, six U.S. Navy “boomers”—nuclear submarines armed with ballistic missiles—suddenly sailed from their home base into the Atlantic to assume deterrent patrols (normally, two or three of them conduct such operations). That very infrequent action was synchronized with the NATO military exercise Air Defender 2023—the largest of the sort since the end of the Cold War. This, apparently, represents a warning signal to the Kremlin. Against that background, both North Korea and Iran have accelerated their respective nuclear programs and the development of WMD delivery means.

Meanwhile, Wagner’s mutiny that ended with the migration of its vestiges abroad, can potentially export instability to Eastern Europe (from Belarus) and Africa. It is not difficult to imagine the possible turf wars between Wagner elements and the Ukrainian intelligence services (GUR and SBU) in third countries, far away from the conflict zone.

Synopsis

- The major Ukrainian counteroffensive goes on; despite objective complications, Ukraine appears to be maintaining the strategic initiative.
- The recent Wagner mutiny is a direct product of the war; de facto, it opens a “second front” inside Russia and aggravates the systemic crisis.
- Russia’s domestic factors will have increasing influence on the course of war.
- To preserve the existing political construct, the Kremlin needs to “conserve” the present level of war, which suggests a rejection of total mobilization in favor of a stalemate on the battlefield that could, in time, result in a frozen conflict.
- To destroy that plot, Ukraine (and its partners) will try to deliver to Russia a most traumatic defeat on the battlefield.
- That objective could materialize if Ukraine’s counteroffensive results in the capture or isolation of Crimea.
- The feasibility of such an undertaking is neither excluded nor assured, and depends on a wide array of variables, while the time left to achieve success is shrinking.

Notwithstanding the weariness of war and the suffered losses, Ukraine’s leaders, army, and the nation as a whole, have so far demonstrated their determination to achieve victory (however defined). Factors like technological superiority, structural effectiveness, and motivations are playing decisive roles. However, these have limits. There are only a few short months left to achieve a breaking point in the conflict (i.e., before the end of autumn 2023). Otherwise, it will turn into an impasse or quagmire.

Western decisionmakers face hard dilemmas. Their stratagems on ending of war range from the need to engender a total debacle and the collapse of Russia to the necessity to negotiate a political solution. The upcoming NATO summit in Vilnius, beyond the declarative part, will unlikely determine the defined course.

Meanwhile, the wisdom of history acknowledges that “Russia is never as strong as she looks, and never as weak as she looks” (this *bon mot* is attributed to Talleyrand, Metternich, and Churchill, amongst others). And yet, Russia was self-defeated twice in the past century (1917 and 1991). The future dynamics on both of Russia’s fronts will show whether history repeats itself once more.