

The Wall Will Fall

Where mainstream media fears to tread

[Home](#) [About](#)

Special Military Operation, Season 2

vanessa beeley / 40 seconds ago

[“Big Serge” on Substack writes:](#)

September 9 – 11 will go down in history as a period of great significance in the Russo-Ukrainian war. Both belligerent parties crossed very important thresholds, which taken together suggest that the war is entering a new phase. On the 9th and 10th, Ukraine achieved its first concrete success of the war by retaking all the Russian-held territory in Kharkov Oblast west of the Oskil river, including the western bank of Kupyansk and the transit node of Izyum.

Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin convened an emergency meeting of his national security council, which precipitated Russia’s own escalation on the 11th, when Ukrainian infrastructure was at long last subject to attack, plunging much of the country into darkness.

It seems clear that the war is entering a new phase, and it seems highly likely that both parties will attempt to take decisive action in the near future. For now, let’s try to parse through the developments of the past week and get a handle on where the war is heading.

The Kharkov Counteroffensive

At the risk of sounding very pedantic, Ukraine’s counteroffensive in eastern Kharkov Oblast is an excellent demonstration of the difficulties in evaluating military operations. Everyone agrees on the basic geography of what has happened: Ukraine cleared everything west of the Oskil river of Russian forces. Nobody agrees on what this means, however. I have seen all of the following interpretations posited – note, people reached all of these conclusions from the same set of data:

- Russia has drawn Ukraine into a trap and will soon counterattack
- Russia voluntarily withdrew from Kharkov to prioritize other fronts
- Russia drew the Ukrainians out to hit them with artillery
- Russia suffered a massive intelligence failure and did not see or respond to Ukraine's offensive
- Russia suffered a defeat in battle and was forced to retreat

Let's do a methodical autopsy and see what we come away with.

The first thing we want to note is that the disparity of forces on this front was absolutely laughable. Ukraine assembled a strike group of at least five full brigades, and aimed at a line of contact which had **no Russian regular troops at all**. The Russian frontline defenses in the region were manned by allied donbas militia and national guardsmen. It seems there was a lone Battalion Tactical Group (BTG) in Izyum, but little else.

It is undeniable, even for Ukrainians celebrating the advance, that Kharkov oblast had been almost completely hollowed out of Russian troops, leaving little more than a screening force. Two important things flow from this. First, that the Ukrainian shock group was in most places advancing against virtually nonexistent resistance. Secondly, more ominously for Ukraine, the low quality units left behind for screening purposes were able to put up good resistance against the Ukrainians – the Rosgvardiya men in Balakliya held out tenaciously for several days before evacuating through a corridor.

In my [previous analysis](#), conducted while the Ukrainian counteroffensive was just beginning to develop, I noted two important things about the shape of the battlefield.

1. I argued that Ukraine would be unable to push across the Oskil and properly exploit their offensive.
2. I noted that Ukraine was making rapid advances against thinly manned, hollowed out portions of the front, and that Russia had committed very little to the battle.

Both of these statements were correct. I freely admit, however, that I drew the incorrect conclusion from them. I believe the Ukrainian advance would culminate at the Oskil river, leaving them vulnerable to a Russian counterattack by the arriving reserves. It seems fairly clear now that this is incorrect, and the Russian reserves that were en-route were tasked with stabilizing the defense at the Oskil, not launching a counterattack.

This was not an operational trap by Russia, but neither was it a victory in battle for Ukraine – for the simple reason that **there was not much of a battle at all**. Russia had already hollowed out these positions, and withdrew the remaining screening forces very quickly. Ukraine covered a lot of ground, but were unable to destroy any Russian units, because there really weren't any there.

It would be silly to try to talk the Ukrainian side out of their excitement right now. Credit where credit is due, they did manage to put together a good sized shock group, aim it at a weak portion of the front, and regain a good bit of ground. Considering the abject lack of successes for Ukraine in this war, they are rightfully trying to eke every last bit of morale and propaganda out of this.

I do not, however, believe that the territorial losses in Kharkov in any way change the ultimate calculus of the war. Russia hollowed out this front and surrendered ground, but they were able to maul the Ukrainian forces as they advanced with relentless artillery and

airstrikes. Ukrainian channels widely report overflowing hospitals. The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed 4,000 killed and 8,000 wounded for Ukraine during their advance – I believe this is high, but even if we reduce the numbers by 50% (leaving us with 6,000 total casualties, reasonable given how much ordnance Russia discharged) it is very clear that the loss ratios in this operation were stacked badly against Ukraine, as they always are.

Momentum

As I predicted in my last piece, Ukraine has so far been unable to exploit their offensive by reaching the operational depth. They have been totally unable to project forces across the Oskil River. With the advance eastward firmly culminated, they are seeking to maintain their momentum, or at least the appearance of it.

Ukraine's successful advance in Kharkov Oblast has been augmented with a blitz of fakery and propaganda designed to simulate a total shift in strategic momentum. These include fakes related to Russian domestic politics, such as fabricated calls for Putin's impeachment, and battlefield misinformation, like claims that the Ukrainian Army has breached the borders of the LNR or stormed Donetsk City. They have also circulated out of context videos (the most popular one shows a Russian vehicle depot in Crimea) purporting to show that the Russians abandoned hundreds of vehicles in Izyum.

The fakery is not important. Ukraine will, however, also attempt to maintain battlefield momentum by piggybacking on the Kharkov operation with additional counteroffensives. They continue to attempt to cross the Donets River in force to storm Lyman, unsuccessfully. They also continue their attacks in the Kherson direction, making little progress and taking high casualties.

The most important development, however, is the claim that a second Ukrainian shock group has been assembled in Zaporozhia. This is an area where the geography actually would allow Ukraine to achieve operational exploitation. A successful drive towards Melitopol or Mariupol would compromise the land bridge to Crimea and threaten to crumble Russia's entire position in the south.

Unlike Kharkov, however, this is not a hollowed out portion of the front. The newly formed Russian 3rd Corps is concentrated in the south, and Russian convoys have been spotted recently moving through the Mariupol region. Ukraine may very well attempt yet another offensive operation in this direction, but given the strength of the Russian grouping here the results will be more like Kherson than Kharkov.

Sovereignty

During the opening months of the war, I argued on Twitter that massed offensives are difficult, and that Ukraine had not yet shown the organizational ability to organize an operational higher than the brigade level. All the attacking action that we saw from Ukraine early on took the form of single brigade – or more often, single battalion – commanders taking initiative.

Well, lo and behold, Ukraine managed to field at least two (Kherson, Kharkov) and perhaps three (Zaporizhia) multi-brigade shock groups, and launch coordinated operations. This was made possible because Ukraine is a pseudo-state, which is supplied, financed, and increasingly managed by NATO. Western agencies cannot resist bragging – Britain

identified itself as the party responsible for planning and organizing the Kherson operation, while the [USA claims credit](#) for the more successful Kharkov attack.

It is difficult to overstate the extent to which Ukraine is sustained solely by the west. Ukrainian soldiers are trained by NATO officers, armed with NATO weapons, accompanied in the field by NATO soldiers foreign volunteers, and the Ukrainian pseudo-state is kept running by cash injections from the west. Videos from the Kharkov front abound with [English speaking soldiers](#) and foreign weapons.

The point isn't just to point out, yet again, that Ukraine is a failed state – a corpse that is given the illusion of life by outside actors moving its limbs. The point is that Russia understands this and correctly understands itself to be in a civilizational collision with the west. To that end, we must understand that Russian escalation is underway, and think about what that means.

Escalation and Mobilization

By this point, the idea that Russia needs to mobilize has become a tired old meme, courtesy of the deranged Igor Strelkov. It is certainly true that Russia must escalate, but leaping directly to mobilization (putting the economy on war footing and calling up conscripts) would be a grave mistake. Russia has other, better ways to escalate. The recent Ukrainian advance in Kharkov is an obvious signal to raise the force deployment, and Ukrainian potshots at targets across the Russian border only add to the pressure to take the gloves off.

First, I would like to comment on why I am against mobilization. One of the most important dimensions of this war is the economic front. Europe is being driven to the brink by the energy crisis. The [Wall Street Journal](#) keyed in on what I believe to be the most apt descriptor of the crisis, warning of a “new era of deindustrialization in Europe.”

A full mobilization would be very costly for Russia's economy, risking the edge that it currently holds in the economic confrontation with Europe. This, I believe, is the main reason that the Russian government was quick to quash rumors of mobilization today. There are other steps on the escalation ladder before going to total war footing.

There are already rumors that Russia is planning to [change the formal designation](#) of the war, from “Special Military Operation”. While that could mean a formal declaration of war, I think that is unlikely. Rather, Russia will likely give the Ukraine operation the same designation as its operations in Syria, loosening the rules of engagement and beginning to target Ukrainian assets in earnest.

We saw a foretaste of this last night, when Russia wiped out over half of Ukraine's power generation with a few missiles. There are many more targets that they can go after – more nodes in the electrical grid, water pumping and filtration facilities, and higher level command posts. There is at least some probability that Russia begins targeting the command facilities with NATO personnel in them. Plausible deniability works both ways; because NATO is not officially in Ukraine – only “volunteers” – targeting their personnel is not an overtly aggressive act.

Russia also has many ways to boost its force deployment in Ukraine that fall short of full mobilization. They have a pool of demobilized contract soldiers that they can call up, as well as a pool of reservists that they can raise with a partial mobilization.

The Russian line is hardening. Just in the past 24 hours, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said there were “no prospect for negotiations” with Ukraine, and Putin said “Unfriendly forces are targeting us, and we must take initiative in order to succeed in confronting them.” Medvedev went even further just now: ““A certain Zelenskyy said that he will not hold a dialogue with those who issue ultimatums. The current ‘ultimatums’ are a warm-up for kids, a preview of demands to be made in the future. He knows them: the total surrender of the Kiev regime on Russia’s terms”

If you believe the Russian government is utterly incompetent and duplicitous, feel free to view statements like this as bluster. But given the warning shot at Ukrainian power generation yesterday, my sense is that Russia is preparing to escalate to a higher level of intensity, which Ukraine cannot match with its indigenous resources. Recent The only other player on the escalation ladder is the United States.

Dark times area ahead for Ukraine – and perhaps for Americans on the other front of this war.

The Other Southern Front

Syria and Ukraine are two fronts in the same war. This is very important to understand. In Syria, the United States has attempted to wreck Russia’s most important Middle Eastern ally and create a Trashcanistan of chaos to suck in Russian resources; in Ukraine, NATO has armed a kamikaze state to hurl at Russia’s western border. In the Russian mind, these wars are inextricably linked.

After the Kharkov counteroffensive, I strongly suspect that Russia will look for a way to strike back at the United States, without crossing red lines that could lead to a more direct confrontation. Syria is the place where this would happen. The United States maintains several illegal bases on Syrian soil, which Russia could strike using its Syrian allies much the same way that the United States is using Ukraine. Russia is in the finishing stage [training a new Syrian airborne division](#). With Russian air cover, an attack on one of the American bases in Syria would be possible – the USA would be forced to choose between shooting down Russian planes and flirting with nuclear war, or humbly accepting the loss of an illegal base that it has worked hard to hide from its own citizens. Given the utter lack of enthusiasm among the American public for yet another war in the Middle East, it seems that the USA would simply have to swallow the loss.

Big Serge Expectations:

1. Russian escalation of attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure and command centers.
2. Russian force deployment raised without full mobilization.
3. Intensification of Russian efforts to recover DNR territory.
4. Possible escalation in Syria, likely in the form of Syrian army attacks on US bases.

September 13, 2022 in Uncategorized. Tags: Kharkov, Ukraine

Related posts

[Retired Swiss Intelligence Officer Explains Ukraine](#)