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STALEMATE: UKRAINE'S FAILED COUNTEROFFENSIVE

In Ukraine, a war of incremental gains as counteroffensive stalls

By Washington Post Staff

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(Illustration by Emily Sabens/The Washington Post; Wojciech Grzedzinski for The Washington Post; Staff Sgt. Jordan Sivayavirojna/U.S. National Guard; Sasha Maslov for The Washington Post; iStock)

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ZAPORIZHZHIA, Ukraine — Soldiers in the 47th Separate Mechanized Brigade waited for nightfall before piling — nervous but confident —

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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.

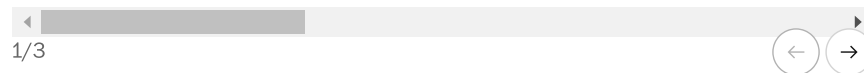
#### How we reported on Ukraine's counteroffensive

This is the second of two parts examining the Ukrainian counteroffensive that launched in June. Read the first part in the series, which looks at the military planning for the operation, [here](#).

#### Part two:

**Reported by** Michael Birnbaum, Karen DeYoung, Kamila Hrabchuk, Alex Horton, John Hudson, Mary Ilyushin, Kostiantyn Khudov, Isabelle Khurshudyan, Dan Lamothe, Kostiantyn Khudov, Serhii Korolchuk, Greg Miller, Serhiy Morgunov, Siobhán O'Grady, Emily Rauhala, David L. Stern, and Missy Ryan.

**Written by** Isabelle Khurshudyan.



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.

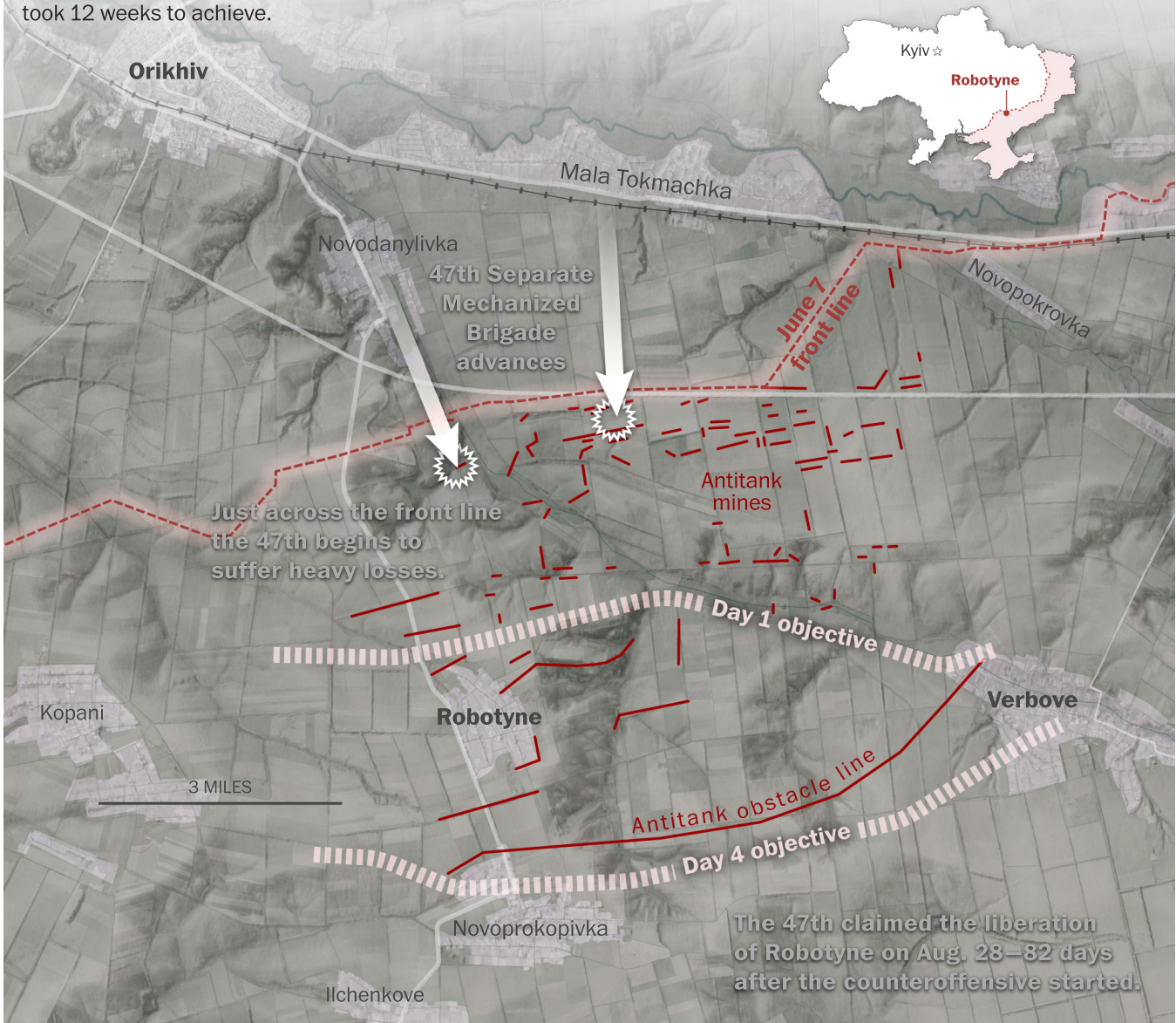
By day four, Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, Ukraine's top commander, had seen enough. Incinerated Western military hardware — American Bradleys, German Leopard tanks, mine-sweeping vehicles — littered the battlefield. The numbers of dead and wounded sapped morale.

#### 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.



Sources: Institute for the Study of War and staff reports

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.



Gen. Mark A. Milley, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, meets on Jan. 16 with U.S. Army leaders responsible for the training of Ukrainian soldiers at Grafenwoehr Training Area in Germany. (Illustration by Emily Sabens/The Washington Post; Staff Sgt. Jordan Sivayavirojna/U.S. National Guard; iStock)

## 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.

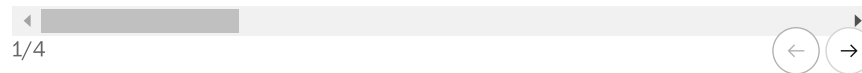
The installation had been used to train small groups of Ukrainian soldiers since 2014, when Russia invaded and illegally annexed Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula. In anticipation of the counteroffensive, the effort was scaled up with one or more battalions of about 600 Ukrainian soldiers cycling through at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

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



“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, armored 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 percent of the soldiers in the 47th didn’t have any battlefield experience, according to one senior commander in the brigade.





Soldiers of the 47th Separate Mechanized Brigade at an undisclosed location in Ukraine on May 17, not long after returning from U.S.-run training in Germany. (Illustration by Emily Sabens/The Washington Post; Heidi Levine for The Washington Post; iStock)

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.



Soldiers and mechanics in the 47th test-drive a U.S.-made Bradley Fighting Vehicle at a secret workshop in the Zaporizhzhia region in mid-July. (Illustration by Emily Sabens/The Washington Post; Ed Ram for The Washington Post; iStock)

## 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 and enable the Russians to take territory there and, potentially, in Kharkiv to the northeast.



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.



A commander of a Bradley Fighting Vehicle who goes by the call sign Frenchman, with his crew in August in the Zaporizhzhia region. (Illustration by Emily Sabens/The Washington Post; Heidi Levine for The Washington Post; iStock)

## 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 percent 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 armored maneuver and a breakthrough didn’t work,” the official said. “We had to change tactics.”

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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.



Ukrainian soldiers prepare to remove an antitank mine during a July exercise in the Dnipro region, even as troops were struggling to navigate Russian minefields in the counteroffensive farther south. (Illustration by Emily Sabens/The Washington Post; Ed Ram for The Washington Post; iStock)

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.”



A drone pilot with the call sign Sapsan, part of a unit within the 47th, flies a first-person-view drone, or FPV, from a forward bunker position in the south in September. (Illustration by Emily Sabens/The Washington Post; Wojciech Grzedzinski for The Washington Post; iStock)

## 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 armored 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.



Video from Ukraine's 47th Separate Mechanized Brigade shows highly maneuverable racing drones strapped with explosives hitting targets. (Video: The Washington Post)

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 nighttime 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.”



A Ukrainian soldier walks by a destroyed Ukrainian tank near Robotyne on Aug. 25, three days before the 47th would declare the village liberated. (Illustration by Emily Sabens/The Washington Post; Viacheslav Ratynskyi/Reuters; iStock)

## 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.

**Territory reclaimed in Ukrainian counteroffensive this year**





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.

Ukrainian police in the Lyut Brigade clear Russian positions in eastern Ukraine. The brigade provided the video to The Washington Post. (Video: The Washington Post)

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.”



The chief sergeant of a drone unit within the 47th walks down a road at the southern front in September to check the unit's surroundings. (Illustration by Emily Sabens/The Washington Post; Wojciech Grzedzinski fot The Washington Post; iStock)

## 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.



Gen. Oleksandr Tarnavsky controlled half of the brigades in the counteroffensive, fighting along the two main axes in the south. In the north and the east, Gen. Oleksandr Syrsky controlled the other half. (Illustration by Emily Sabens/The Washington Post; The Joint Press Center of the Tavrria Defense Task Force; iStock)

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.





Gen. Christopher Cavoli, center, head of U.S. European Command, and Lt. Gen. Antonio Aguto, right, head of the Security Assistance Group-Ukraine, visit Grafenwoehr Training Area in Germany on July 7. (Illustration by Emily Sabens/The Washington Post; Sgt. 1st Class Kevin A. D. Spence/U.S. Army; iStock)

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 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."



Members of Ukraine's 93rd Mechanized Brigade, or "Kholodny Yar," on the eastern front on June 2, just days before the counteroffensive would launch. (Illustration by Emily Sabens/The Washington Post; Sasha Maslov for the Washington Post; iStock)

## 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.”



Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, Ukraine's top commander, arrives on Nov. 25 to place a candle at the National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide in Kyiv. The Holodomor was a man-made famine resulting from Soviet policies under Joseph Stalin in the early 1930s. (Illustration by Emily Sabens/The Washington Post; Oleg Petrasuk/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock; iStock)

***Stalemate: Ukraine's failed counteroffensive.*** This is part two of a two-part series. [Read part one here.](#)

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*Map sources: The Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project; OpenStreetMap. Brady Africk, who analyzed satellite imagery from Copernicus Open Access Hub, provided fortifications data, which does not include all fortifications in Ukraine; some defenses predate Russia's full-scale invasion.*

## What to know about Ukraine's counteroffensive

**The latest:** The Ukrainian military has launched a long-anticipated [counteroffensive against occupying Russian forces](#), opening a crucial phase in the war aimed at restoring Ukraine's territorial sovereignty and preserving Western support in its fight against Moscow.

**The fight:** Ukrainian troops have intensified their attacks on the front line in the southeast region, according to multiple individuals in the country's armed forces, in a significant push toward Russian-occupied territory.



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**Codybear1** 3 minutes ago

Allowing the Russians to dig their trench systems and mine the land was a huge mistake. Surely we saw this from our satellites in real time. The Ukraines needed whatever it took to stop them from building these defensive/offensive systems.



**SilenceDoBest** 57 minutes ago

The Russians on defense are a formidable foe. The Germans learned that lesson repeatedly in WWII—Moscow, Leningrad, Stalingrad, and culminating with the Battle of Kursk in 1943.

The Ukrainians screwed themselves by not concentrating their counter-offensive in one massive armored mailed fist. There is no reason they couldn't have held the Russians elsewhere along the rest of the front while they punched through. They frittered away their one big chance of success.



**kennkids** 59 minutes ago (Edited)

Nobody in their right mind smashes head on into the strongest part of the defense. Were they forced to by US demands? What does 31 Obsolete ABrams tanks do overall? Nothing. Its a tank, Tanks are passe. Why not give them a couple of Battleships? They are obsolete too. The offensive part of the UA couldnot happen.



**worthmj** 59 minutes ago

So let me see if I have this straight (sidenote I'm a retired senior field grade Army officer.)

We provide combined arms training to the Ukrainians so they would become adept in US tactics. This, after US training of host nation forces in Iraq and in Afghanistan worked out so well. (yes sarcasm)

\$15

We then ask the Ukrainians to attack using these tactics, but without air superiority which is key and forgetting completely to integrate the use of drones, which both the Ukrainians and Russians have used to great affect

CONCLUSION: Never ever trust the US military to train your forces from scratch. A better approach, would be to take the host nation's existing tactics, and tinker with them — you don't do wholesale retraining,

Further, you should never ever listen to retire general Talking Heads on CNN — — LTG retired Mark Hertling being at the top of the list of clowns who  
aimed this

pimped units.

Lastly, an old adage applies here. If you look around the room and you don't know who the idiot is, then it's you!



**JackBeNinble** 1 hour ago

The buck stops with Joe B. From the beginning, Joe lets Putin set the red lines and parameters. Joe said, "No, no, no...we can't do this...or that, 'cause Putin is serious about nuking us." So, Putin charged ahead with Ukraine badly underfunded and ill-equipped, and will walk away with 30% of Ukraine. (Maybe 25%)...of Ukraine's industrial lands, seaports, mineral deposits, and prime agricultural land.



**Korrok** 52 minutes ago (Edited)

Oh good God. Straight from the Russian disinformatsya handbook.

From February 2022 to October 2023, the U.S. provided \$75 billion to Ukraine, despite Trump and the Republicans kneecapping the effort at every opportunity. That's \$4.1 billion per month, or about \$133 million per day.

And BTW, casualties in Ukraine so far:

Russia: 300,000+.

USA: Zero.



**Julie - Mount Pleasant DC** 1 hour ago

I hate, hate, hate seeing Russia still have one acre of Ukrainian territory. It's confusing to follow the whole story with so little true reporting out of Russia itself, but I hope that Russian defections and protests by soldiers' mothers will continue to rise. Reading this 2-part story, I was really struck by the fact that Putin's threats of the nuclear option have completely receded. (Apparently, he has enough sanity remaining to understand that Russia would be on the receiving end of nuclear fallout?) I wonder if NATO has reevaluated its postures in light of the fact that the nuclear saber-rattling was only that?



**Foreign101** 1 hour ago

Medical care might help get rid of the hate.



**JackSparrow** 2 hours ago

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.

This leads to the slaughter we've been seeing on the battlefield. It's compounded when the Ukrainian military leadership doesn't listen to the

US experts and have no clue on how to fight.

Hold off support for it's a money pit



**Scrimmin** 2 hours ago

After reading this report, I'm not so sure "US experts" know how to fight the new kind of war being fought between invading Russia and defending Ukraine. I hope they are learning from the Ukrainians' experience. Sadly, the Ukrainians are doing the dying, while being second-guessed by Washington experts and NATO generals who have never experienced this type of warfare!



**JackSparrow** 1 hour ago

It's evident that Ukraine is losing the war and support due to incompetence, corruption and a weak coalition



**Korrok** 1 hour ago

It's not evident at all that Ukraine is losing. Russia is at Day 640 of its 10-Day Special Military Operation and has suffered 300,000+ casualties. NATO is stronger and more united than ever, and the only countries providing military assistance to Russia are North Korea and Iran. Russia is slowly being pushed out of Ukraine - yes, it's slow, but the other way to look at it is that Russia hasn't taken a hectare of new land from Ukraine in over a year.

Russia's only hope is to somehow reinstall their puppet Trump next year.



**ZT205** 1 hour ago

If we withdrew support, the Russians would be on the offensive—and they'd be successful. Putin still thinks he can win the war, and has not made any serious peace offer. Even if he did, Russia cannot be trusted and ceding land would encourage them to try this all over again.

If you want to end the money pit, arm Ukraine well enough to win for good. Even if it takes several years and costs more in the short term. If Ukraine can drive Russia and its proxies out completely, it can join NATO, and Article 5 will prevent this from happening again.



**JackSparrow** 1 hour ago

Putin is satisfied keeping the 17% of the occupied territories of Ukraine he now controls. He's looking for a way to end the war to and save face. The US is looking for an out too but they want Zelensky to settle for peace. Ukraine can't continue to be slaughtered at the front for they don't have the manpower. Morale is at an all time low with his troops. Its only a matter of time





**Gary Smith Hawaii** 40 minutes ago

"Putin is satisfied keeping the 17% of the occupied territories of Ukraine he now controls"

For now, he still has an empire to build.



**mfkpadrefan** 1 hour ago

so, another member of the Kremlin caucus, AKA MAGAts!



**JackSparrow** 1 hour ago

Ha. McConnell supports the slaughter of stupid Ukrainians. He's kind of smart and treacherous. That's your mAGA connection



**mfkpadrefan** 1 hour ago

Another comments from the Kremlin caucus.



**JackSparrow** 1 hour ago

I agree Ukraine and Russia are both corrupt entities



**Cardinal Richelieu** 2 hours ago

Concentrating your forces has been tactics 101 for real armies and war videogamers alike. German schwerpunkt. What Ukraine did just did not make any sense.



**Scrimmin** 2 hours ago

Did you even read the story, Cardinal? I think not.



**ZT205** 1 hour ago

Tactics 102 says that concentrating armor doesn't work very well when the enemy has air superiority.

Another important issue, which unfortunately this article doesn't talk about, is force structure. It's not just Ukrainian enlisted men who need training. Ukraine's brigade-level staff does not have experience coordinating large assaults. That's not the kind of thing you can improvise or learn on the job. (And the brigade is the largest unit in the Ukrainian army—they don't even have divisions like the US.)

Ukraine can win through attrition and small unit tactics given enough time and ammunition. Attriting Russian forces is what created the gaps that made the Kharkhiv offensive work

that made the Ukrainian offensive work.



**mybusiness1** 2 hours ago

I'm not sure why it took the war in Gaza for the press to write a sobering assessment of the war in Ukraine. But, it's useful for the public to see more than the one-sided reporting that's been the norm for the last year and a half.



**GeorgeMichael3** 9 minutes ago

This!



**Mar a Loco or Bust** 2 hours ago

"Incinerated Western military hardware — American Bradleys, German Leopard tanks, mine-sweeping vehicles — littered the battlefield. The numbers of dead and wounded sapped morale."

And while this carnage was going on there was no reporting whatsoever about this in the Washington Post or other major media. It is now that that US aid has come to a conclusion that we're hearing about what a real disaster this entire US taxpayer funded boondoggle has been.



**Julie - Mount Pleasant DC** 1 hour ago

That's not remotely true. The barely budging lines with offensives, counter-offensives, destroyed armaments, and casualties on both sides have been well reported. What this new reporting is about is a careful analysis of the strategizing over the past half year.



**Gary Smith Hawaii** 33 minutes ago

Really? 85% of the "boondoggle" goes to US companies. 300k+ dead and wounded along with untold hardware is a major disaster for Russia on the world stage as they crawl to NK and Iran for help. Seems like one hell of a good deal for the US and western Europe.



**JackBeNinble** 2 hours ago

This reporting is excellent and, obviously, a reality check. I'm sure the Russians will enjoy reading it and will hand out medals to their defensive commanders. For the West, it's a message of the consequences of political fragmentation, timidity, disunity, and half-hearted efforts. Putin and Russia are on the same page; the West is in a scattered pile of good intents and droves of excuses. Let the infighting begin, and then the blame games.



**HelsinkiSyndrome** 3 hours ago

If Russia feels this invasion was worth it, they will do it again. That is just logical. In a few years they will attempt to take more from Ukraine or try

something easier, like Moldova, Georgia, Kazakhstan.

If this remains a stalemate, the sanctions on Russia must stay on longer than the 2030, which is the year that has been agreed upon so far. Oil, ng, travel restrictions, frozen funds and properties, import and export sanctions. No international sports. How about making it clear these will stay in place for minimum of 10 years if Russia does not pull back from eastern Ukraine.



**Mar a Loco or Bust** 2 hours ago (Edited)

Sanctions have been a complete flop Russia is selling more oil now than ever raking intense billions of dollars a month from China Saudi Arabia India and Iran. Sanctions only hurt western European countries and destabilize their governments because of higher prices.



**HelsinkiSyndrome** 2 hours ago (Edited)

Nonsense. Russia not selling more oil than ever. It is selling about the same in barrels as pre-war, but the revenue is a third lower because of price cap - lower price per barrel. That means the profit has been cut more than 50%.

Meanwhile Russian budget has bloated over 50% because of costs of war and need to compensate losses to people.

Financially this is not sustainable for Russia.



**Mar a Loco or Bust** 59 minutes ago

You could not be more wrong. Numerous news articles have recent recently been written in the NYT and WSJ on how successful Russians have been evading Western sanctions.



**michael primak** 2 hours ago

The West/NATO has already shown that they won't actually directly oppose Russia. Moldova, Georgia, and Central Asian countries are all in the crosshairs now. And if there is a failure to stop Russia in Ukraine then no Western country populations will support pouring money into other countries to defend against Russia. It will look like a pointless waste of money. The very credibility of NATO is on the line here.



**Cheato MacDonald** 3 hours ago

In any war you have to adjust to your enemies tactics.

How long do you think Russia's vaunted defensive lines would hold if they came under sustained cluster munition bombardment?

I believe Ukraine's strategy of dispersing it's forces and allowing russians to throw themselves into a meat grinder was the correct decision. The west needs to help Ukraine to build up the ammo and weaponry to win. Not merely keep the russians at bay. It is easy to urge Ukraine to throw more



into an assault from the comfort of your office in the pentagon. A large massed force would be a tempting target for a russian tactical nuke. Putin has opted for a war of attrition. Give him his wish. In the meantime send Ukraine the equipment that is slated to be decommissioned. Give them the F-16's needed to establish air superiority. Then send the the A-10 warthogs to clear the ground. It will take time to shape conditions on the ground for the successful clearing out of the russian menace. Patience and logistics will win the war.

In the meantime domestic enemies of freedom must be defeated here at home. Of course all this is easy to type from the comfort of my couch.



**ZT205** 52 minutes ago (Edited)

Don't expect F-16s to establish air superiority. They are not stealth aircraft and are still vulnerable to Russian surface to air missiles. Russia is not running out of those any time soon, thanks to the Soviets building a huge stockpile under the assumption that they would never beat NATO in air-to-air combat.

The main reason Ukraine needs F-16s is to negate Russian air power, not to establish air superiority. F-16s will have to operate the same way Ukraine's air force currently operates, flying low in Ukrainian territory to avoid detection and popping up to shoot at enemy planes. The difference is that the F-16's superior radar and air-to-air missile range will allow Ukrainian F-16s to take out the Russian planes lobbing glide bombs from above their own lines. Ukraine could also use the F-16 for air support near the front line, but Ukraine already has artillery for that and HIMARS/Storm Shadow for deeper strikes. Negating Russian glide bombs and other standoff weapons will be the real contribution, which Ukraine can't currently do with its other systems.



**howard\_b\_golden** 3 hours ago

While focusing on the extensive military war games, the articles omit the crucial political maneuvering. Why did the politicians and the state department reject providing more effective missiles and delay training of Ukrainian pilots on the F-16 until it was too late to use in 2023?

I am critical of the Biden administration's hesitancy to support Ukraine fully.

On the other hand we must reject Trump's planned autocracy to keep what's left of our constitutional republic.



**MrPerryWhite** 4 hours ago

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.

We expect them to fight a NATO type war without giving them the NATO tools. We're asking the Ukrainian army to fight the proverbial "one hand behind your back" battle. Give them the tools they need to defend their

country or be honest about it and tell them to cut the best deal they can with Putin.



**Grandpa 68** 4 hours ago

It appears likely that the Ukrainian approach to the long front defended by Russia may have saved scores of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers who have lived to fight another day.

Now it is up to the US to demonstrate resolve, that we truly will support Ukraine for as long as it takes. We should probably contact our Congress people to urge them to support Ukraine 100 percent with no excuses. War is not a halfway proposition. The lack of air and range superiority is not excusable.

You can bet that the Trumpians are loud and proud about trashing Ukraine to their Congress members and promoting the Putin/Trump views.

Our fight is to show our leaders that we the average citizens care about freedom in Ukraine and Security in Europe.



**Roger Marietta** 4 hours ago

the Post needs to clear the Russian propaganda from its paper by giving its journalists lie detector tests on whether they are taking rubles on the side.



**Korrok** 4 hours ago

I'm as pro-Ukrainian as anyone, but I don't see this article as shilling for the Russians. The Ukrainians have made mistakes, and so have we as their benefactors. Go ahead, show me a war where no mistakes were made. But the biggest mistake of all was Putin's decision to invade Ukraine in the first place.

It's not the media's place to be the cheerleaders.



**steveerossa** 3 hours ago

This is the ultimate test, will they along with NATO persist and adjust, or will they demand surrender like Orban and Wiilders. If they tell Ukraine to give up, they should also disband NATO. No point hanging around after this.



**Freicha L** 4 hours ago

I keep waiting to read that one portion of strategy is to make Putin unpopular with both the Russian people and the Kremlin.



**wverick** 4 hours ago

As the saying goes, success has many fathers and failure is an orphan. This article appears to be an attempt to make Ukraine's "counteroffensive" an orphan. And perhaps it is the beginnings of an attempt to make an orphan out of the entire NATO Ukraine proxy war against Russia.

As for the article itself, the article is based largely on statements of the U.S. military and the national security apparatus. I would've been helpful to have provided context, informing readers that these organizations have a rich tradition of lying to each other and to the media, as the Washington Post showed in a brilliant article about the delusion/self-delusion and lying committed by many of these same agencies regarding the "progress" being made during the war in Afghanistan.



**Telemachus Sneezed** 4 hours ago

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.”

This, exactly, among other issues in this stellar reporting.

The main other issue is NATO telling Ukraine, "You're doing it wrong", all the time when there isn't a major military in the world that operates without close air support. "Use smoke" ..

End state is probably stalemate on the current borders as they are unless robust air support, including air defense, are brought to bear.

God bless the people of Ukraine. They are truly the Wolverines.



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