FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 17.08.2023 | Helmut W. Ganser

A bitter battlefield stalemate

The Ukrainian counter-offensive is faltering. Instead of endlessly supplying new weapons, the West should cooperate in the preparation of peace talks

Ukraine's successful counterattacks in autumn 2022 led a fair number of German and international commentators to hype up quick wins by Ukrainian troops in their counteroffensive in the southern front, launched in early June 2023. The expectation was that the nine or so brigades trained and equipped by NATO states would break through Russian defensive lines and push forward as far as the road and rail links on the Crimean land bridge or even up to the Sea of Azov.

This expectation was based on wishful thinking, however, rather than any objective situational assessment. Spring estimates by military economists predicting Ukrainian military victory in autumn 2023, for example, were based on flagrant miscalculations. The projection of Russian attrition rates in 2022 onto the situation in the following year was too crude. Russia clearly has substantially more forces in Ukraine than at the beginning of the war.

Offensive operations against ground troops defending heavily fortified positions and capable of mobile defensive operations with close air support around their trenches are among the most challenging military undertakings. Heavy losses are to be expected in such scenarios, above all among the attackers. An assault against such well-prepared defences is something completely new for the Ukrainian brigades.

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The Russian leadership's ability to learn from its mistakes, in contrast to the first year of the war, was underestimated. For example, Ukrainian attackers suffered considerable losses in forward-lying minefields well before the main Russian lines. Modern Western battle tanks and armoured vehicles were destroyed.

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It was unrealistic to assume that the newly established Ukrainian brigades would be able to master complex combined operations coordinating multiple manoeuvre elements. Tactical errors were inevitable. NATO forces have to practice complex interactions constantly and still don't get it absolutely right.

An increasingly difficult situation

The Ukrainian military leadership has now learned from its initial mistakes and changed and slowed down its tactical approach. It's attempts to limit the erosion of its own forces while wearing down Russian troops is almost impossible — trying to weaken Russian troops through attacks on command posts, command support facilities and logistic distribution points, as well as crucial supply bridges, using long-range rocket artillery and British and French cruise missiles.

The Ukrainian general staff presumably would have to throw all nine available brigades into battle to try to break through Russian lines. But even if this succeeded at one point or another, Russian tank forces with artillery and air support could sever and strike breached Ukrainian units from their supplies. Under this scenario, the danger would be that large parts of the Ukrainian counterattacking brigades would be destroyed, taking further terrible losses in men and matériel. The Russian troops could potentially resume their offensive after the formation of new tactical and operational reserves in the winter.

In the coming months the expected rain and mud will make it increasingly difficult for mechanised forces to attack. The counteroffensive has not failed — but Ukraine should avoid the trap of a clearly unsustainable intensive war of attrition. The current war is in fact a continuation of the war of position and attrition that has been going on since autumn 2022. Kiev's political and military leadership is likely to confront some tough decisions on whether to keep trying to break through with its still fully operational brigades, or for the time being to focus on consolidating the current front line.

This bitter battlefield stalemate is in line with General Mark Milley's prudent assessment and projection, one of the most knowledgeable and sensible high-level US experts. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff stated as early as November 2022 that both sides need to understand that their war aims cannot be achieved by military means alone and that negotiations are indispensable. Other experts have expressed themselves far less accurately and analytically. For example, retired US general Ben

Hodges stoked expectations in the German media months before the Ukrainian counteroffensive that Ukraine could break throughright up to Crimea.

Given the lack of territorial gains after two months he and others are now denouncing Western complicity for arms deliveries that were too little too late. Such stab-in-the-back accusations are frivolous and speculative. One could just as well say that faster and bigger weapons deliveries would have speeded up Russian defence preparations. Arguments based on what might have been tend to be cheap, being neither provable nor refutable.

A German arms supply debate

As the counteroffensive continues to lose momentum there is increasing clamour in Berlin to supply Ukraine with Taurus cruise missiles. According to press reports, the federal government is exploring technical ways of limiting this weapon system's range to rule out attacks on Russian territory. The aim is to avoid unpredictable escalation. The US, the UK and France, as far as we know, have not taken this path. Hitherto, Kyiv has kept its word by not using long-range rocket artillery systems and cruise missiles to strike at Russian territory.

The German debate's dominant focus on Russian territory, meanwhile, appears to be missing the point. The long-range Taurus KEPD-350 system is optimised for destroying take-off and landing strips and bunkers. The Ukrainian air force is likely to use the Taurus, if it gets it, primarily to take out Crimean bridges, including the 19 km long Russian-built Kerch bridge. Taurus warheads are ideal for this purpose. Although Deep Fires' long-range accuracy is not a game changer, the destruction of Crimean bridges would deal a heavy blow to Russian military logistics.

As it mulls the possibility of delivering Taurus cruise missiles the German government must carefully consider possible Russian reactions to the destruction of bridges using German weaponry. That has less to do with escalation fears, despite careless and dismissive claims to the contrary, than with sober, rational analysis and impact assessment. Moscow would likely ratchet up its own escalation spiral in response to the loss of crucial Crimean supply bridges.

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The Taurus weapon system's 500-kilometre range is almost double that of all previous arms deliveries, for example, from the US, the United Kingdom and France. Why should Germany once again have to outdo weapons deliveries from the three Western nuclear powers? They

German manufacture. French and US battle tanks have not yet reached Ukraine.

are permanent members of the UN Security Council, with a pre-eminent responsibility for peace and security. All three have their own national nuclear deterrent.

The current Taurus debate in Germany recalls the dispute about tank deliveries in early 2023. Fairly vague announcements in London and Paris on providing battle tanks to Ukraine were taken as an excuse even within the government coalition to put the upmost pressure on the Chancellor to make German battle tanks available. It has since become clear that almost all Western battle tanks were delivered from Germany or of German manufacture. French and US battle tanks have not yet reached Ukraine. The United Kingdom has supplied a few Challenger tanks. The US will deliver 31 older Abrams M1s but only in the autumn, equipping a tank battalion.

Ukraine's declared war aim of liberating all occupied territory, including Crimea, is absolutely legal under international law and entirely legitimate politically and morally. The demand that Ukraine must receive what it needs to defend itself, including military reconquest of the occupied areas is thus justified and understandable.

But it remains merely theoretical and is scarcely achievable in practice. Rather it is clear that the additional human and material costs to Ukraine of complete military reconquest would be incalculable and presumably unsustainable. Furthermore, there are limits on Western governments' ability to keep supplying weapon systems and munitions. For example, the *Bundeswehr*, which remains at low operational readiness, while still having to fulfil its NATO obligations, cannot be further weakened by weapons and munitions deliveries.

Clearly, within the framework of future conference outcomes the international community must never recognise the lands Russia has occupied and annexed.

Given the military stalemate Ukraine conferences like those in Copenhagen and Jedda gain in importance. Concerning the Russian war in Ukraine the very experienced retired American diplomat Thomas Pickering published an important article in *Foreign Affairs* in March 2023 on the preparation of complex peace talks and the phases through which they can be brought to a conclusion. He spells out that a longer preparatory phase is needed under the aegis of the international community in order to get substantive negotiations under way between the conflicting parties.

Conferences such as the one held recently in Jedda pave the way for later ceasefire negotiations and ensuing peace talks. All participants must commit to the long term and submit to a complicated and protracted process in which rapid progress is not to be anticipated.

Clearly, within the framework of future conference outcomes the international community must never recognise the lands Russia has occupied and annexed. The humanitarian situation of Ukrainians there must be brought into line with international human rights standards, as far as possible under UN supervision. War crimes perpetrated by the occupiers need to be prosecuted and subject to legal judgement. Ways of resolving the decisive territorial issues must, while maintaining Ukrainian sovereignty, be an integral part of any potential ceasefire agreement in the future.



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