

Ukrainian breakthrough as a window of opportunity: How can Ukraine's allies use this moment to secure success?

Launched between the end of August and the beginning of September, Ukraine's still-underway counteroffensive operation appeared surprising, rapid, and highly disruptive for the Russian occupation forces. While it is objectively recognised as the greatest success of Ukraine's defence forces and Russia's most disastrous defeat since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, there should be no euphoria.

The good news is that by performing an exemplary military operation, Ukraine reached a milestone in mid-September and has taken the strategic initiative into its hands. However, experts and the military community suggest this is not even the beginning of the end. Several factors represent a significant threat to Ukraine's civil population, while the situation on the frontline is challengeable. Soon after the details of the Russians' defeat became public, Russia [launched](#) a series of missile strikes targeting critical infrastructure objects to demonstrate what could be expected during the winter season. Putin also renewed his nuclear blackmailing, synchronised with the preparation of the orchestrated pseudo-referendums.

*Now, Ukraine's operational-tactical level success should be secured on the political level. The numerous victories on the battlefield should lead to victory. For Ukraine, the breakthrough costs an extremely high price. This window of opportunity opened by the Ukrainian defence forces should now be used with the utmost efficiency to amplify the support and to help Ukrainians win the battle for survival. Winning this battle would prevent the spread of 'Pax Russica' further into the European continent. There are at least **five reasons** why to invest in transatlantic security right now.*

To ensure a strategic shift, Ukraine's allies would need to adopt a threefold coordinated complex of actions; a) keep providing weapons and other military support (or finally start doing so) to Ukraine; b) intensify economic sanctions on Russia; c) perform reinforced political isolation of Russia.

Ukraine's win back: The need to secure control over the liberated areas

First, particularly because of its successful counteroffensive, Ukraine as never before requires heavy weapons and financial aid to cover its rising military needs. According to [President Zelenskiy](#), as of September 23, Ukrainian forces managed to liberate around 9000

sq.km and nearly 400 towns and villages since the beginning of the offensive. Earlier in September, [Hanna Malyar](#), Ukraine's Deputy Minister of Defence, said that approx. 150 000 civil inhabitants had been liberated as a result of the campaign. This also implies that currently, Ukrainians are dealing with a 2500 km-long frontline, of which approximately 1300 km is an area of high-intensity combat action.

The ongoing counteroffensive, which is now shaping the new contours of the control-of-terrain map, is also bringing a number of challenges, such as the need to ensure control over the extensive areas, – a Special Operations Forces operator explained during a private conversation. To name just a few, Ukraine needs to secure the boots on the ground in deoccupied territories, arrange a complex of protective measures to prevent a re-capture scenario, and conduct demining activities. Needless to say, all this requires accumulating additional human resources, military equipment, and modern weapons.

Foreign military and financial aid packages would allow Ukraine to allocate resources as required within the areas of the highest demand in order to prevent a rollback and turn Ukraine's rapid tactical achievement into a long-term strategic assurance.

Top priority directions: Covering the frontline gaps, enabling further offensive

Second, apart from the deoccupied areas in the East (Kharkiv direction), there are several most challengeable directions which require the concentration of effort. While civilians' excitement caused by the recent breakthrough is understandable, Ukrainian military leadership keeps a level head.

This is reflected in the [article](#) *Prospects for running a military campaign in 2023: Ukraine's perspective*, written by Commander-in-Chief Gen Valeriy Zaluzhnyi and LTG Mykhailo Zabrodskyi, a legendary military, currently MP. The authors soberly evaluate the perspectives of the warfare development, suggesting what factors are likely to play a key role in securing Ukraine's gains and what threats need to be given the highest priority. Among the latter, the generals name a possible advance of the enemy in the Zaporizhzhia direction which would put the cities of Zaporizhzhia and Dnipro under the threat of being captured, and the "[...] revisited plans to gain control of Kyiv and the threat of renewed invasion from the territory of the Republic of Belarus". Nevertheless, the Southern direction is raising the greatest concerns. If the enemy advanced in the South Buh direction, it would open the path toward Odesa and Mykoliav but also northward in the Kryvyi Rih direction.

Despite the run-away in the East, the enemy continues forming a new defence line in Donbas, strengthening its positions, stockpiling ammo depots, and accumulating equipment and personnel. In the South, the situation can change in favour of the Ukrainian forces soon. According to a senior [military official](#) at the Pentagon, in the Kherson region, “[...] the Russians essentially are in a defensive crouch”. Nevertheless, it should be considered that the enemy is actively using the territory of the temporarily occupied Crimea to transfer the equipment, ammo, and provision in the Kherson direction.

Now, when Ukrainian forces have demonstrated a confident advance in the East, the supply of heavy Western machinery is needed to enable its offensive in the Southern direction. In the best-case scenario, that would allow the clearing up of the occupied areas of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, opening the path to Crimea. Primarily, the required military aid includes European and US-made anti-aircraft defence systems, self-propelled anti-aircraft guns, howitzers, tanks and armoured vehicles, combat aircraft, MLRS, surface-to-air missile systems such as NASAMS, UAV systems, artillery, and tank shells.

Economic pressure: The time for coordinated and tailored sanctions

Third, it should be taken into account that since February 24, the impact of the Western sanctions imposed on Russia has already brought results. Dependent on foreign technologies and military innovations, Russia’s military-industrial complex is now living at its worst times. As it experiences the lack of modern weapons and equipment, the Russian army struggles when confronting the latest developments of Western arms.

However, if applied precisely to target Russia’s budget-forming sectors, regular and tailored economic sanctions are expected to have a much more significant impact. Oil and gas sales form half of the revenues of the Russian budget. Within the first six months of the full-scale invasion, Russia earned EUR 158 billion in revenue from fossil fuel exports, of which 54% are EU-imported (worth approx. EUR 85 billion) – the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air [reports](#). This puts the EU in the first position among fossil fuel importers. The study also suggests that “[f]ossil fuel exports have contributed approximately EUR 43 billion to Russia’s federal budget, [...] helping fund war crimes in Ukraine.”

A long-expected EU-member states’ [decision](#) to accept the 8th sanctions package, which would set the price cap for Russian oil, is welcomed. However, the inability to reach an agreement for quite a while, with Cyprus and Hungary [opposing](#) the G7 proposal, indicates that there is still no shared understanding within the EU on the urgency and firmness of the

sanctions against Russia and the need to reconsider the overall energy policy. Moreover, Russia will most likely [find opportunities](#) to minimise the losses, which would be a test for the Western states. It is up to the national governments whether they should provide their own insurance for vessels carrying Russian oil, which depends on their political will, the need for energy resources, and the evaluation of the risks of falling under secondary sanctions. Furthermore, coordinated action is needed to restrict the export of electronic components used in weapons to Russia.

Mobilisation: More space for movement in imposing political isolation of Russia

Fourth, Putin's announced mobilisation can be interpreted in at least two ways. On the one hand, Ukrainian forces consider it in the quantitative dimension rather than in the qualitative. Even a million newly-arrived Russian soldiers on the border – primarily unprofessional, with very poor or no physical training and extremely low morale – are very unlikely to create a strategic shift on the frontline. Indeed, the professional Russian military was unable to capture “Kyiv in three days” and is still unable to do so after seven months. However, the significant increase in manpower will undoubtedly prolong the time of the fighting, which is another reason to keep providing Ukraine with the arms it requires.

On the other hand, Putin's decision to gather the mob indicates that he is losing the war. Both the agonising attacks against Ukraine's critical infrastructure following the Ukrainian forces' advance and the nuclear blackmailing point at the regime's vulnerability and weakness. The announced mobilisation uncovered the autocratic government's inability to fix the “destructive” processes within the state, demonstrated by the authorities' poor attempts to manually handle the mass migration of men abroad.

After all, the warfare scale's enlargement initiated by Russia is also Putin's appeal to NATO. Supposedly, it had to actualise the existing threats for the states bordering Russia and remind the overall transatlantic community that Putin does not plan to stop in Ukraine. Western actors can use the mobilisation as another impetus to perform political isolation of Russia, for instance, by closing European states' borders from those fleeing the mobilisation. (The vast majority of Russians support the war against Ukraine. They should not be given asylum. They instead should have been fighting against their government.)

Foreign aid wisely applied: Investing in the regional security

Lastly, Ukrainians have already proved they know how to fight and that they will win. This is also a signal to the transatlantic stakeholders: wisely and efficiently applied foreign military and financial aid can be converted into deterrence mechanisms to guarantee security for the wider region.

Arguably, the psychological element is among the key ones determining the course of a war. Russia's war against Ukraine is no exception. The Armed Forces of Ukraine have shown they can beat the mythological "second strongest army in the world". The people of Ukraine have proved they can withstand the shock, regroup, and adjust their way of living by focusing on war needs. The government has demonstrated it can handle the crisis while activating foreign policy instruments. During the months of the full-scale warfare, Ukraine has been proving the idea that the winner always attracts friends and allies. The Ukrainian breakthrough is another example of this mechanism at work. While the counteroffensive had a huge moral and psychological impact on the enemy, it also had an equally strong effect on the states standing on Ukraine's side.

As such, for the allies, it has demonstrated the ability of the General Staff to plan complex operations, showing a high level of competence in C2, or Command and Control. It also proved the ability of the Armed Forces to act coherently, demonstrating specific techniques which are likely to become Ukrainian best practices, such as the small light-armed tactical groups' work. Furthermore, it highlighted Ukrainians' ability to learn how to use modern Western weapons quickly. The extension of the foreign-based military training programmes and the latest Ramstein-5 meeting [reflect](#) that the NATO allies unanimously recognise Ukrainian professionalism. As mentioned by NATO Secretary General [Jens Stoltenberg](#), taking over the strategic town of Lyman in the Donetsk region is yet another demonstration that Ukrainians "[...] are able to push back the Russian forces because of their courage, because of their bravery, their skills but also because of the advance that happens that the United States and all the allies are providing, and this makes the difference on the battlefield every day".

Clearly, Russia will not stop after Ukraine liberates all of its territories, including Crimea and Donbas, as its strategic goal is to destroy Ukraine as a nation. Fighting for its own survival but also for the security of the entire European region, Ukraine overcame a point of no return. Now, it requires reinforced support to bring the victory closer.