

## What's Ahead in the War in Ukraine

### Description



by U. S. Lt. Col. Alex Vershinin via [Russia Matters](#)

The war in Ukraine has dragged on for nearly 10 months. After an initial Russian cavalry dash seized over 20% of Ukraine, Russian forces then smashed into determined Ukrainian resistance, ending in an embarrassing retreat from Kyiv. From then, the war became an attritional contest between Russia on one side and Ukraine fighting at the head of a Western coalition on the other. During the summer, Russian offensives captured Lyman, Lisichansk and Severo Donetsk. In the fall, Ukrainian offensives recaptured Kharkiv province and Kherson city, shrinking Russian control to roughly [50% of the territories](#) they had captured since Feb. 24, according to one estimate. The opposing sides have adopted two opposing strategies: Russians are fighting a traditional firepower-centric war of attrition; Ukraine is pursuing a terrain-focused war of maneuver. These opposing strategies are as much a product of national resource availability as a deliberate choice. As freezing ground ushers in the winter campaign season, both sides will follow their strategies into limited offensives.

So far both strategies appear to work. Ukraine has recaptured large swaths of territory but exhausted itself during the fall offensive. It suffered [frightful losses](#) and [depleted key stockpiles](#) of equipment and ammunition. There is still capacity to replace losses and establish [new combat formations](#), but those are rapidly withering.

I believe that neither side will achieve spectacular territorial gain, but the Russian side is more likely to achieve its goals of draining Ukrainian resources while preserving its own.

### The Ukrainian Strategy

The Ukrainians' terrain-focused war of maneuver is constrained by two factors: limited artillery ammunition and equipment production, and coalition considerations. Ukraine started the war with [1,800 artillery pieces](#) of Soviet caliber. These allowed firing rates of [6,000 to 7,000 rounds](#) a day

against 40,000 to 50,000 Russian daily rounds. By now this artillery is [mostly out](#) of ammunition, and in its place Ukraine is using 350 Western caliber artillery pieces, many of which are [destroyed or breaking down](#) from overuse. Meanwhile, Western nations are themselves [running out of ammunition](#); the U.S. is estimated to produce only 15,000 155mm shells [a month](#). This constraint has forced Ukraine to adopt mass infantry formations focused on regaining territory at any cost. Ukraine simply cannot go toe to toe with Russia in artillery battles. Unless Ukrainian troops close to direct fire fights with Russian troops, there is a significant chance that they will be destroyed at a distance by Russian artillery.

Ukraine's second constraint is the coalition nature of its warfare. Since running out of its own stocks, Ukraine is increasingly reliant on Western weaponry. Maintaining the Western coalition is crucial to the Ukrainian war effort. Without a constant string of victories, domestic economic concern may cause coalition members [to defect](#). If Western support dries up due to [depletion of stock](#) or of political will, Ukraine's war effort collapses for lack of supplies. In some ways, Ukraine has no choice but to launch attacks no matter the human and material cost.

Ukraine built an infantry-centric army of highly motivated conscripted troops with limited to no training. They support the core fighting force of the prewar professional army and about [14 new brigades](#) equipped with Western-donated weapons and vehicles. On the battlefield, strike groups attack quickly, penetrating deep and fast, then hand over captured areas to draftees to defend. This tactic worked well in areas where the shortage of Russian manpower prevented a solid front, such as in the Kharkiv region. In the Kherson region, where Russia had sufficient density of forces, this tactic resulted in large casualties and little progress, until logistic issues caused Russia to retreat.

The Achilles heel of this strategy is manpower. Ukraine started the war with [43 million citizens and 5 million](#) military-aged males, but according to the U.N., [14.3 million](#) Ukrainians have fled the war, and a further 9 million are in Crimea or other Russian-occupied territories. This means Ukraine is down to about 20 to 27 million people. At this ratio, it has less than 3 million draftable men. A million have been [drafted already](#), and many of the rest are either not physically fit to serve or occupy a vital position in the nation's economy. In short, Ukraine might be running out of men, in my view.

## The Russian Strategy

The Russian forces are limited by manpower but strengthened by massive artillery and [equipment stockpiles](#) enabled by a robust [military industrial complex](#). While there have been numerous reports in Western media that the Russian army is running out of artillery ammunition, so far there's been no visible slacking of Russian artillery fire on any front. Based on these factors, the Russian side has relied on a traditional [firepower-centric war of attrition](#). The goal is to force an unsustainable casualty rate, destroying Ukrainian manpower and equipment, while preserving Russia's own forces. Territory is not important; its loss is acceptable to preserve combat power. At Kyiv, Kharkiv and Kherson, the Russian army refused to fight under unfavorable conditions and withdrew, accepting the political cost to preserve its forces.

To execute this strategy, the Russian army relies on firepower, particularly its artillery. Each Russian brigade has [three artillery battalions](#) compared to just one in each Western brigade. Paired with correction by massed quantities of UAVs and quadcopters, Russian artillery pulverizes Ukrainian forces before infantry mops up survivors. It is a slow, grinding war, but with a casualty ratio that is significantly [in Russia's favor](#). Russia couldn't attack because it lacked the manpower to secure the

flanks of advancing troops. Up to now, Russians could only advance in Donbas, where advance did not extend the frontline. Even here the intent was more to [draw in](#) Ukrainian forces and [destroy them](#) rather than capture the city of Bakhmut. Mobilization has the potential to overcome Russia's manpower shortages and enable offensive operations, while equipping its forces is possible due to the [mobilization of industry](#). Precision munition production is also up, despite [consistent doubt](#) in Western press. Video of strikes by Russian "Lancet 3" loitering kamikaze drones is up [up by 1,000%](#) since Oct. 13, according to one estimate, indicating a major increase in production.

## The Coming Winter

If the Ukrainians decide to launch a major offensive, they could do so in two places, in my view. The first is in the north, in the Kharkiv region, but limited crossing over the Oskil River generates the same logistical challenges the Russians faced at Kherson. The second is in the south, to [cut off](#) the Russian land bridge to Crimea, eventually capturing the peninsula. This is unlikely to succeed. The Ukrainian army would be attacking in terrain ideal for Russian artillery. It could become a repeat of the battle at Kherson, but without Russian logistics difficulties, stemming from a limited number of crossings over the Dnipro River, with just as little gain and the same heavy losses marked by whole [mechanized companies](#) wiped out, endless scenes of [ambulance convoys](#) and [new cemeteries](#) all over Ukraine. The levels of attrition would play right into Russian hands. The political pressure on the Ukrainian government to justify the losses taken from Russian artillery in Donbas by retaking territory elsewhere, as well as the pressure from the Western coalition, may drive Ukraine to attack regardless.

For the Russian leadership the question is: When and where to attack? The timing depends on Russian artillery ammunition stocks. If they are high, Russia may attack in winter, otherwise it may stockpile and attack in spring after the mud season. Timing is also driven by the training requirements for the mobilized reservists. Longer training increases the effectiveness of the reservists and reduces casualties, thus lowering political risk for the Kremlin. Ultimately, the pressures that the Russian leadership views as most important will decide the outcome. Will the pressure from domestic politics for a quick victory win out, or will military considerations favor delaying until the end of spring mud season in March/April? So far, the Kremlin has gone with military considerations ahead of political ones, suggesting that Russia will launch only a limited offensive this winter.

Location is another factor. The Kharkiv front is heavily wooded, restricting the effectiveness of firepower, and it is strategically meaningless without attacking the city of Kharkiv. This major urban center would take months to capture at very high cost. A limited attack to regain the Oskil River line would improve Russia's defensive line but present no strategic gain. In Donbas, the Russian army is already maintaining pressure. Extra manpower and artillery units won't speed up that offensive much. For the Russian army, the Zaporizhzhia front holds the most promise. The Pologi-Gulai Polie-Pokrovskoye railroad is ideally placed to supply a Russian offensive driving north from Pologi. Eventually capturing Pavlograd would allow the capture of Donbas by cutting off two main railroads and highways supplying the Ukrainian army in Donbas and attacking the Ukrainian army there from the rear. The open terrain is ideal for the Russian firepower-centric strategy, and a chance to draw in and destroy the last of the Ukrainian operational reserves and further attrite its manpower is directly in line with Russian objectives. Lastly, the hard frozen ground would make new defensive positions hard to dig without heavy equipment. The limited attack vicinity of Ugledar could be a shaping operation to secure the eastern flank of the future offensive.

## Conclusion

Wars of attrition are won through careful husbandry of one's own resources while destroying the enemy's. Russia entered the war with vast materiel superiority and a greater industrial base to sustain and replace losses. They have carefully preserved their resources, withdrawing every time the tactical situation turned against them. Ukraine started the war with a smaller resource pool and relied on the Western coalition to sustain its war effort. This dependency pressured Ukraine into a series of tactically successful offensives, which consumed strategic resources that Ukraine will struggle to replace in full, in my view. The real question isn't whether Ukraine can regain all its territory, but whether it can inflict sufficient losses on Russian mobilized reservists to undermine Russia's domestic unity, forcing it to the negotiation table on Ukrainian terms, or will Russian' attrition strategy work to annex an even larger portion of Ukraine.

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