

The Winter Assault - Russian and Ukrainian approaches to war in late winter 2022/23

It has been eleven months since the start of the Russian large-scale invasion of Ukraine. The almost year long period of open warfare has taken its toll on the armed forces of both sides. Many military experts believe that the harsh winter conditions would halt the majority, if not all, offensive operations and serve as a moment of respite, recuperation and reinforcement. However, the uniqueness of the Ukrainian battlefield and the approach of command staff of both sides, point to the conclusion that late winter 2023 will bear witness to key battles and offensives.

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The influence of winter on Ukrainian battlefield

After many months of continuous warfare, both the Russian and Ukrainian forces have suffered heavy attrition. Autumn has been especially challenging, with the ever present sea of mud that engulfed the steppes in eastern Ukraine, making any manoeuvres extremely challenging, the fighting had devolved into trench warfare akin to World War One. This attritious standstill had continued into December, with the majority of offensive operations grounding to a halt. Avril Haines the US director of intelligence claims this to be the beginning of a relatively calm winter season, with both sides looking to resupply and reinforce in order to launch fresh offensives in spring.¹ What Haines fails to remember however is that what follows winter is another mud season, much like the one that bogged down any offensive operation before the setting of winter. Winter itself on the other hand offers a very tempting possibility for offensive operations, as the cold temperature freezes the steppes, creating very good conditions for manoeuvre warfare.² The mechanised armoured vehicles of both sides, previously held back in fear of succumbing to the mud, will once again be able to move freely. Furthermore, Serhii Cherevatyi spokesperson of the Ukrainian Armed Forces Eastern Group stated that Ukrainian forces are preparing armoured vehicles for winter operations, claiming that frozen ground will allow them to advance, thus suggesting that Ukrainians will go on the offensive sometime in the winter months.³

Russian perspective on the winter months

The Russian forces will aim to achieve several objectives during winter, first of which is reinforcement and resupply. While it is hard to ascertain Russian losses it is certain that after prolonged and sustained combat operations, they would reach considerable levels. The

reinforcement and resupply of frontline units would have been hampered by the mud season, which made roadways hard to navigate or even impassable. Furthermore, the increased pace of offensive operations in and around Bakhmut would have drained resources at an even faster pace. This leads to a conclusion that Russian forces are in need of resupply and reinforcement if they hope to continue operating.

There are several key endeavours undertaken by Russian forces in order to meet the demand for resupply and reinforcement. Firstly, Russian troops are to be reinforced by the arrival of the rest of mobilised men, while some are still completing training in Belarus, Crimea, or serving in the Russian far rear. Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, General Valeriy Zaluzhny estimates around 200,000 fresh Russian soldiers will soon be sent to the front.⁴ Furthermore, a significant number of the first batch of mobilised soldiers have been sent to reinforce the city of Kherson, however as the Russian retreated from the city, these troops can now be utilised in other parts of Ukraine – if this hasn't already been done. Thus, Russian forces could soon be reinforced by large numbers of men that could be used to stabilise the frontline or mount a new offensive. Furthermore, according to a number of sources, Russia is preparing to mobilise another 500,000 soldiers.⁵ While these conscripts will not be ready to enter combat soon, they would provide a crucial reinforcement pool for the Russian forces in the near future. In order to equip new soldiers Russia intends to re-fire its vast military industrial complex, with General Zaluzhny stating that the vast industry located beyond the Urals has already begun production.⁶ The supply issues are now being tackled in several ways, with the Crimea bridge restored to functionality a swift transfer of supplies from Russia into southern Ukraine is now possible. Furthermore, Russian forces have set up a new base in Melitopol, that will serve both as a marshalling point for troops, as well as a supply hub, due to its strategic location and large number of transport routes and facilities.

However, resupply and reinforcement aren't the sole objective of Russian forces during winter. Russian forces continue conducting offensive actions across the frontline in eastern Ukraine, with a particular focus on the Bakhmut region. The gruelling battle for the city of Bakhmut began several months ago and continues to escalate. While battle takes place in Bakhmut itself, Moscow forces under the leadership of Wagner Group pursue key targets around the city. Around December 27th, 2022, Wagner Group began a major assault on the town of Soledar, around 10-15 km northeast of Bakhmut.⁷ As of January 10th, 2023, Russian forces controlled the majority of Soledar, meaning that in a relatively short time since intensifying their assault (2 weeks) they managed to break through Ukrainian defences.⁸ As of January 15th, 2023, Soledar is considered to be controlled by Russian forces, and Bakhmut could quickly follow, as this opens new avenues of attack for Russian soldiers, but also allows them to contest the M-03 highway between Bakhmut and Slovyansk which is the major supply and evacuation route for Bakhmut. The control over the highway is also key for potential future offensive operations for Russian forces. If Bakhmut is taken, Russians might be tempted to use the M-03 to launch an offensive operation against the twin cities of Slovyansk and Krematorsk, which lie only about 40 km northwest of Bakhmut. The cities hold a substantial strategic value as they serve as major logistic hubs and marshalling points for Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine, with several railway junctions, the M-03 highway, and two airports. While the

highway alone wouldn't be able to accommodate the entirety of Russian troops, they could take advantage of the freezing temperatures to advance across the frozen steppes and farmlands surrounding the road. The highway would be particularly valuable in the spring, as it would offset some logistics and manoeuvre issues caused by the coming of mud season. This scenario seems more likely when coupled with the Russian efforts to resupply and reinforce the Bakhmut region with additional troops, the potential second mobilisation, and the current Russian narrative that centres on the capturing of the entirety of the Donbas Oblast.

While eastern Ukraine might be the current hotspot it is important to remember other axis of Russian operations, namely Belarus. For the past several months a number of Russian troops have been moved into Belarus, mostly for training before being sent to the frontlines with the two countries conducting joint drills and training manoeuvres. However, over time Russian presence in the vicinity of the Ukrainian northern border steadily grew, with not only foot soldiers but armoured vehicles being sent into the area. As of early January 2023, there are more than 9,000 Russian troops and hundreds of armoured vehicles stationed near the Ukrainian border.⁹ The situation is only worsened by the weather, with the low temperatures freezing the marshes on the Belarus-Ukraine border the advance of troops is much more feasible. The possibility of a renewed Russian offensive from Belarus has been heavily disputed, but it still remains an open possibility with General Zaluzhny stating that an attack from the north towards Kyiv could happen.¹⁰ The capital may not be the sole target however, in a recent visit to Lviv President Zelensky discussed the situation on the northern border and the possibility of an attack in the region. Lviv currently functions as a major transport and supply hub for western supplies coming into Ukraine, if it would come under threat of Russian forces, it would heavily hamper Ukraine ability to supply their forces. However currently the possibility of that happening is very low, as stated by President Zelensky himself.¹¹ Despite the low possibility, the looming threat of an offensive from Belarus keeps precious resources and soldiers away from the ongoing fights in eastern Ukraine, where they might be sorely needed.

Ukrainian Perspective on the winter months

The first and major objective of Ukraine during winter is the resupply and reinforcement of their forces. General Valeriy Zaluzhny, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, stated in mid-December 2022 that the current priority is the creation of reserves that will be used in operations in the late winter. During an interview with *The Economist* General Zaluzhny stated "May the soldiers in the trenches forgive me, now it is more important to focus on accumulating resources for more protracted and heavy fighting that may begin next year."¹² This comment again shows that Ukrainian forces are now focusing on creating new reserve formations, while hinting that this is possibly done at the cost of resupply and reinforcement of its frontline troops. General Zaluzhny further stated that he requires more resources and equipment to prepare his forces, listing 300 tanks, 600-700 infantry fighting vehicles, and 500 howitzers. As General Zaluzhny stated if he gets the reinforcements he needs: "Then, I think, it is quite realistic to reach the frontiers on February 23. But I can't do it with two brigades. I get what I get, but less than I need".¹³ However, this quote not only shows the general's aims but also hints at the reason why Ukraine is in sore need of new

reinforcements. If this is to be taken verbatim, rather than as a figure of speech, Ukraine also boasts two brigades of reserves – somewhere between 6000 and 10000 soldiers plus their equipment. Fortunately for the forces of Ukraine in the weeks following this statement several NATO allies namely US, Germany, and France, pledged to send support. The US will send 18 Paladin self-propelled howitzers, 100 M113 APC, 138 Humvee trucks, and most importantly 50 Bradley IFV, while Germany pledged 40 Marder IFV, and France an estimated 30 AMX-10 RC light tanks.¹⁴ Furthermore, in a key step forward for western support for Ukraine, the United Kingdom pledged to deliver 30 AS90 self-propelled guns and more importantly a squadron of 14 Challenger 2 main battle tanks, whose Ukrainian crews would be trained in the UK.¹⁶ While this number isn't particularly high it is aimed to break the deadlock on the proposal to send western made main battle tanks into Ukraine, which resulted from fears of escalation into NATO territory and simultaneous depletion of European standing tank forces. These fears were further increased by the statement of Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova: "As we've said previously, weapons supplies are legitimate targets for Russian strikes."¹⁷ However, despite the Russian threats, UKs bold move along with pressure from the Polish government managed to break the deadlock. On 25th January 2023 Germany pledged to send 14 Leopard 2A4 main battle tanks to Ukraine, simultaneously allowing other users of the German made tanks, most prominently Poland, to do so as well. Previously such a move was impossible due to German export laws which prohibit foreign users of German made military equipment to redistribute it without proper consent from Germany. Furthermore, the breaking of the deadlock also resulted in President Biden's announcement to send 31 Abrams to Ukraine. The new equipment does not fully meet Ukraine's needs, but it is a significant step in building up Ukrainian reserves, and a continued pledge of increased western support for Ukraine.

Ukraine however will not sit idle and wait for the reinforcements while the winter conditions accommodate offensive operations. Currently no major offensives are taking place, with General Zaluzhny stating in a recent interview: "I cannot conduct new large operations, although we are currently working on one. She's on the way, but you haven't seen her yet."¹⁸ The offensive will probably be carried out by the reserves currently being formed by Zaluzhny, although as he himself stated they are not yet sufficient nor ready. The arrival of the new batch of previously discussed western equipment, along with western trained Ukrainian soldiers will surely facilitate this endeavour. As for the place of this offensive operation it is known that for several weeks now Ukrainian forces have been probing and assaulting Russian positions near the occupied towns of Svatove and Kremmina. The two towns, Svatove in particular, are key logistics hubs for the Russian forces in the Luhansk and northern Donbas Oblasts. Should they be retaken by Ukraine, the Russians would face a hard time supplying their forces. If Russia would fail to organise alternative logistic routes, the entire frontline might be forced back deeper into Luhansk Oblast. This would not only mean great territorial gains for Ukraine, but quite importantly heavily hamper if not outright derail Russian offensive operations in and around Bakhmut. The probability of this area being targeted by a Ukrainian offensive was further supported by the Russians, who sent the elite airborne VDV troops to reinforce their position in the region.¹⁹ Thus, late winter 2023 will quite possibly bear witness to a major Ukrainian offensive in the Svatove-Kremmina region.

These aren't the only objective of the Ukrainian forces in the winter however, with renewed Russian assaults the need to hold the line is now as important as ever. As General Zaluzhny stated: "The next task that we have is, first of all, to hold this line and not lose any more positions. It is very important. Because I know that it is ten to fifteen times harder to release it than not to surrender. So, our task now is to hold on".²⁰ While there are many places on the hundreds of kilometres of frontline that are subject to this, there is one in particular that has come under the most intense pressure – Bakhmut. As was discussed earlier Bakhmut has been under a furious Russian assault for months, with recent weeks bringing in fresh Russian attacks on surrounding smaller settlements, in an effort to encircle and capture the city itself. The current focus is on the northern town of Soledar, which overlooks not only Bakhmut itself but the important lines of supply in and out of the city. While Soledar's strategic value, as a steppingstone to capturing Bakhmut and a continued Russian offensive previously discussed, is disputed both by western experts and Ukrainian officials it doesn't seem so to the Russians who continue pouring resources into the fight and have recently claimed to have captured the town. Soledar's and Bakhmut's strategic status is further cemented by the President Zelensky's recent vow to send reinforcements into the area – an interesting move considering General Zaluzhny's statement that he cannot spare any reserves to reinforce the frontline.²¹ Though this does follow another of Zaluzhny's directives – that surrendering ground is much more costly than holding it. The truth may be that the Ukrainians are forced to commit their precious reserves in the hope to stabilise the Bakhmut frontline, though it might come at the cost of being unprepared for battles in late winter, which again according to Zaluzhny himself will surely happen.²²

Ukrainian Homefront

Another key issue for the forces of Ukraine is their homefront, heavily targeted by Russian ordnance strikes. Since early autumn 2022 Russia has been targeting civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, mainly focusing on the power grid, in an effort to hamper the Ukrainian war effort and crush the resolve of the civilian population. This campaign actively draws the strength of Ukrainian forces, with valuable servicemen and equipment having to be stationed in backline areas rather than the frontline. Furthermore, severe damage to the power grid hampers Ukrainian logistics, especially the modern railway network, which results in delayed supplies and reinforcement of frontline units. The lack of the energy grid also cripples the already damaged Ukrainian military-industrial complex, where equipment is not only made but also repaired. The effects on the civilian population are also grievous, as the hard winter sets in and many millions of people are losing access to energy and heating. If the ongoing Russian bombardment campaign continues many more civilians could be forced to flee their homes in order to not freeze to death, as could be seen in Kherson in the last few weeks. Thus, as stated by General Zaluzhny Ukraine should also focus on improving their air and missile defence capability in order to stop these events from happening.²³ This does however mean that further resources will have to be dedicated to protecting the homefront, rather than being utilised on the frontline.

Conclusions

1. Despite the popular view, even among the experts, winter will be a time of some activity, with both sides using the better conditions to reinforce and resupply their forces
2. Russia will most probably capitalise on its recent territorial gains in Soledar and continue offensive operations in Bakhmut with possible further assault towards the twin cities of Slovyansk and Kramatorsk
3. Winter conditions will most probably be used to launch a major offensive by Ukrainians in the Svatove-Kreminna area, in an effort to sever Russian lines of communication.
4. The winter might be utilised by Russians to launch a new offensive out of Belarus, targeting either Kyiv or Lviv, in an effort to disrupt the flow of western military support.
5. Despite recent pledges of support and plans to deliver new equipment Western countries should be prepared to send more military hardware in order to sustain the Ukrainian forces during the winter warfare.
6. Western countries should prepare for the possibility of a humanitarian crisis resulting from Russia's bombardment campaign against critical civilian infrastructure
7. Poland could and most probably will utilise the UK's decision to send western made main battle tanks to Ukraine, to pressure the German indecision deadlock into resolution.
8. As a final thought both Ukraine and its western allies should prepare for a drastic increase in Russian offensive operations, and Russia's newfound drive for protracted attrition warfare that will utilise Russia's vast reserves of manpower and material.

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³ George Barros, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, Karolina Hird, Layne Philipson, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 4", *Institute for the Study of War*, December 4, 2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-4>.

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⁶ "Zaluzhny doesn't rule out new offensive on Kyiv, preparing for protracted battles - The Economist", *Interfax Ukraine*, December 15, 2022, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/878594.html>.

⁷ Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 27", *Institute for the Study of War*, December 27, 2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-27>.

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¹⁰ "Zaluzhny doesn't rule out new offensive on Kyiv, preparing for protracted battles - The Economist", *Interfax Ukraine*, December 15, 2022, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/878594.html>.

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¹³ "Zaluzhny doesn't rule out new offensive on Kyiv, preparing for protracted battles - The Economist", *Interfax Ukraine*, December 15, 2022, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/878594.html>.

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¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "Zaluzhny doesn't rule out new offensive on Kyiv, preparing for protracted battles - The Economist", *Interfax Ukraine*, December 15, 2022, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/878594.html>.

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²⁰ Ibidem.

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²³ Ibidem.

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