

Ukraine's 2023 offensive: The turning point that was not

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The last 12 months, fundamentally focused on the preparation, development, and analysis of the failure of the counteroffensive with which Ukraine intended to definitively recover the initiative in the war, have been confirmation that there is no short-term solution and that, in a dynamic of the military path as the only possible one, all participants – direct and indirect — must prepare for a long-term fight. The beginning of the year, with an attack that caused dozens of deaths among Russian recruits in Makeevka just one minute after midnight, seemed to portend for Ukraine

a continuation of what happened in the last quarter of 2022.

Faced with the inability to maintain such a broad front and with attacks at both ends with a contingent significantly smaller than the Ukrainian one, with serious logistical deficiencies and excessive errors, the Russian troops had no choice but to withdraw from the city of Kherson and the territories of the right bank of the Dnieper without even fighting. The objective was to preserve the integrity of the group present in those territories, with some of the most prepared units, and avoid a military defeat similar to the one suffered two months earlier in Kharkov, where the disorderly withdrawal in the face of the unstoppable Ukrainian advance endangered an important part of the territory gained in Lugansk.

After the recovery of the Kharkov territories, Ukraine hoped to be able to continue its advance in the north of Lugansk, where the defense of Kremennaya and Svatovo was maintained, according to journalists as close to the Kremlin's positions as Alexander Kots, despite the military commanders and no thanks to them. Russia ended 2022 trying to recover from its moment of greatest weakness.

In this context, Ukraine never hid its preparation for a major offensive to repeat the success of the assault on the Kharkov region. On the other side of the front, Russia also did not try to keep secret its transition to the creation of a series of defense lines against the Ukrainian attack, of which it always knew what direction would be. Kiev's goal has not changed since 2014, to recover Crimea, so a move in that direction was the only real possibility for Ukraine. Geography and conditions completely ruled out a massive attack in the Donbass or Kherson areas, where Russian troops were protected by the barrier of the Dnieper River, with its main bridge, the Antonovsky, completely destroyed by the Ukrainian attacks in 2022.

The only surprise option in Ukraine's hands, a massive attack through Russia, was never real due, in part, to the American veto of extending the war to Russian territory. But even apart from that red line, that option had further expanded a front

that has proven difficult to maintain for both parties in the conflict. The Tokmak-Melitopol-Crimea direction through the open countryside of Zaporozhye was always the obvious line of attack that the Ukrainian troops would take the moment they received the required weapons from their partners and the new brigades finished their training.

Flexible defenses

Under the command of General Surovikin, Russia began the construction of what would become a flexible defense line based on fortifications created and improved since November 2022, when the loss of the Kherson territories was completed. As Russian reporters showed for months, the work of building defense strongpoints was, at that time, the main task of Russian troops, who were buying time to equip, arm, and instruct the around 300,000 soldiers recruited since the Kremlin gave the order for partial mobilization after the September defeats.

The delay in preparing the Ukrainian offensive gave Russia even more room for maneuver when it came to improving those aspects that had failed in 2022. With a less extensive front, with fewer logistical difficulties and with a smaller imbalance of troops with respect to Ukraine, Moscow was able to anticipate Ukrainian movements and prepare exactly for the upcoming operation. Russia was also aware that Kiev's Western partners, to whom planning and command capabilities are fully vested, were preparing a ground offensive that would seek a quick rupture using large armored columns. Months of propaganda about the value of Western tanks and the pressure campaign to get Germany to approve the shipment of the desired Leopard-2 had made this clear.

Time would also confirm that Ukraine was not going to have, for this operation planned by NATO countries, the air cover that this type of offensive requires. Ukrainian pleas for Western aviation began the moment the delivery of Western tanks was unblocked, but it was always evident – partly due to the time required for

pilot training — that the F-16s that Zelensky demanded would not be available in the 2023 offensive. As was later learned, the United States was aware that Ukraine did not have the necessary means to carry out the planned offensive, although it hoped that “Ukrainian courage” would make up for the shortcomings.

In an example of how the official narrative can become dogma, both Kiev and its partners chose to blindly trust in the superiority of Western weaponry, training and tactics in the face of Russia’s inability to learn from its mistakes and mobilize its industry to produce the necessary material and, above all, the Ukrainian morale to fight against the broken, undersupplied and ill-equipped Russian army. Months later, Ukrainian officials would publicly denounce that their partners had sent the Ukrainian Armed Forces on an offensive under conditions they would never have accepted for their soldiers.

The change in trend and the Russian ability to prepare to defend itself from an operation in which it anticipated all movements was evident in the first week of June. Days before, after a bloody battle that caused thousands of casualties among its troops, the Russian Federation had achieved its greatest success in almost a year with the capture of Artyomovsk. This advance occurred amid the escalation of the conflict between the Ministry of Defense and the owner of the private military company Wagner, which a month later would give rise to the failed mutiny that made the most optimistic Western pro-Ukrainian analysts see the beginning of a “Russian civil war.” Neither the confrontation nor the mutiny affected the front. Although certain shortcomings persisted – the shortage of artillery shells was one of Prigozhin’s complaints before his notorious coup attempt – and the tactics of the frontal assault could be questioned, from the first moments of June it was obvious that a change had occurred.

Utilizing Iranian drones

Months earlier, Russia had turned to Iran, seeking support for an area in which it

had been left behind: the use of drones. The beginning of the Ukrainian offensive with the march of the first armored columns through the open field of Zaporozhye, perfectly in sight of the Russian troops, demonstrated that Russia had not limited itself to introducing the Iranian Shahed, but had developed kamikaze drones with the Ukrainian operation in mind.

The learning capacity, overcoming obvious shortcomings and good planning of the combined use of drones in the attack, but also in surveillance in combination with artillery, surprised Ukraine. So did the strength of the Russian minefields, an incomprehensible aspect and serious failure in Western planning. In the same way that it was known that Russia built its Surovikin line for defense, it was absolutely foreseeable that it would be capable of extensively mining the fields through which the Leopards, Bradleys and other types of armored vehicles would travel. Without air cover for Ukraine, Russia had extensive superiority in the air, which it complemented with the efficient use of unmanned aviation.

Just a few days after the Ukrainian tank columns left in the direction of Rabotino, Russia achieved the desired image of a first Leopard tank burning in the minefields. That same week, in what seemed a premature assessment, Vladimir Putin declared the offensive a failure. Time and the results of the operation have ended up proving the Russian president right. Already at that moment, when the first change in tactics occurred to abandon large armored columns in favor of smaller and more difficult to detect groups, the United States was also aware of the situation. As can be read six months later, when it is no longer necessary to try to hide the failure of the counteroffensive, it was the American media that confirmed that the objective was a quick break, capture of Rabotino in the first 24 hours, and advance towards Melitopol.

This breakdown of the front and advance on the main city of the territory of southern Ukraine would have meant for Russia a dangerous approach of Ukrainian

troops to Crimea. Politically, this deep penetration into territory under Russian control sought, as Western officials such as Emmanuel Macron and Jens Stoltenberg have made clear, to force Russia into a negotiation in which it would find itself in a position of weakness. Leaks from Pentagon officials in the months of preparation for the offensive had shown that not even Ukraine's partners had confidence in the conquest of Crimea. However, the threat to control of Crimea was understood as the way to pressure Moscow to give in to the Ukrainian diktat.

In the six months of the offensive, Kiev has finally achieved the advance it hoped to achieve on the first day of the attack. After months of fighting, Ukraine conquered the destroyed and uninhabited town of Rabotino, but was unable to overtake it. There was no Russian retreat and the area became a pocket of fire in which casualties continued to be suffered. Russia now appears to be trying to recover that little lost territory while Ukraine moves, just as Russian troops did a year ago, into a defensive phase. Those who then mocked the placement of dragon teeth on the southern front now place them in other areas such as Kharkov.

Siege of Donetsk

Ukraine's move to a more defensive posture does not necessarily mean that a large-scale Russian offensive is occurring or will occur. This year, Russia has demonstrated its defense capacity on the front, although not so much in the rear, where Ukraine has obtained, especially against the Black Sea Fleet, its greatest successes. However, little can be said about Russian offensive capabilities, which this year have been limited to advances on Artyomovsk, put in danger after Wagner's withdrawal and the start of the Ukrainian offensive and the Donetsk area.

The Russian attempt to move the Ukrainian Armed Forces away from the surroundings of the Donbass capital has had only limited success. After a year of fighting and the complete destruction of the city, Russia finally managed to capture the entire territory of Marinka, west of the city, in December. To the north, the

advance on Avdeevka continues, although at a slow pace and at the cost of significant losses (which Ukraine is greatly exaggerating to offset doubts about its huge casualties in Zaporozhye). Both cities are part of the first line of fortifications that Ukraine has built throughout the almost 10 years that the war has lasted in that region.

The prospects for 2024 depend on Ukraine's ability to obtain the necessary financing from its European partners to keep the state afloat and the United States' ability to approve funds that allow the Ukrainian Armed Forces to continue fighting. The mechanisms are already in place according to which Kiev will receive the precious F-16s for its next offensives. As Andriy Ermak promised on his last visit to the United States, next year will be the definitive turning point in the war. Something similar was promised a year ago, and even six months ago, when Antony Blinken declared in the first days of the Ukrainian offensive that Kiev had everything necessary to defeat Russia on the battlefield.

Although it is hoped that financing for Ukraine will be approved — perhaps not at the levels desired by Zelensky, but enough to guarantee the continuation of the war – the reality is that the disappointment of 2023 makes it difficult for the Ukrainian executive to mobilize resources of his partners based on rhetoric of a last effort before the final victory.

The continuation of the battle is the only option available to Zelensky and his team, who more than a year ago closed the door to a negotiated solution. Installed in the maximalism of the demand for complete capitulation of Russia, the Office of the Ukrainian President will continue to navigate between the argument of immediate victory and that of the danger of certain defeat to ensure that the continuous flow of weapons, ammunition and financing is maintained.

Russia, for its part, seems to have understood that it has to play its cards in a long-term war. The recovery of industrial production, the maintenance of a sufficiently

large group, and the control of a front not as extensive as a year and a half ago have guaranteed the status quo of 12 months ago. A series of weak points persist for Russia, among which are its fleet but also some of its cities. This is demonstrated by what happened yesterday: an artillery attack that cost the lives of at least 22 civilians in the center of the Russian city of Belgorod. Despite constant complaints about lack of ammunition, Ukraine maintains intact its ability to harm Russia in the rear, both with the use of missiles against Crimea and with artillery or Grad variants in cities closer to the front line or border.

In terms of attack, for the moment, Moscow has made do or has had to make do, with little progress limited to Donbass, where it has not yet been able to move Ukrainian troops back enough to avoid the bombing of Donetsk. What the defensive and offensive plans of the Russian command will be in the short term is the main uncertainty for the coming months.

Translated by Melinda Butterfield

Source: [Slavyangrad.es](https://slavyangrad.es)

