Evolution of the Military Conflict: Counteroffensive in Ukraine

Farid Kahhat Kahatt

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2312-0438

fkahhat@pucp.edu.pe

© Peruvian Army Center for Strategic Studies 2024. This is an open access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which allows reuse, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided that the original work is properly cited.
Evolution of the Military Conflict: Counteroffensive in Ukraine

Farid Kahhat Kahatt

Summary

The Ukrainian counteroffensive of June 2023 faced significant challenges, marked by uncertainty about its success. Based on three fundamental certainties, including the timing of the offensive, the employment of advanced technology provided by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the focus on the Zaporizhia region, the Ukrainian strategy sought to counter overwhelming Russian quantitative superiority. However, skeptical analysts point to the difficulties inherent in joint operations and deep Russian defenses. Although Ukraine is attempting a war of attrition, its future depends on NATO's continued willingness to provide support.

Keywords: Counteroffensive, Ukraine, Russia, NATO, Strategy.

Introduction

On the turbulent horizon of the confrontation between Ukraine and Russia, the counteroffensive unleashed by Ukraine in June 2023 stands as a crucial chapter in the chronicle of a conflict that has plagued the region. Before delving into the whirlwind of events that characterized this defining milestone, it is essential to dive into the three fundamental certainties that guided Ukraine’s meticulous strategy against Russian positions in its southern and eastern territory. From climatic considerations to the search for technological balance through collaboration with NATO, this analysis unravels the elements that shaped Ukrainian strategy and delineated expectations in a confrontation marked by uncertainty and geopolitical complexity.

The Debate Prior to the Ukrainian Counteroffensive

Before entering the maelstrom of the counteroffensive that shook Ukraine in June 2023, three fundamental certainties outlined the action planned by the
Slavic country against Russian positions in the south and east of its territory. First of all, it was foreseen that the offensive would emerge in the spring of the northern hemisphere, taking advantage of favorable weather conditions. This was projected with the massive use of armored vehicles and tanks, such as the American Abrams, which can exceed 60 tons. Both the slush generated by the autumn rains, starting in October, and the winter snowfalls were serious obstacles to the advance of these imposing war machines.

The second was that Ukraine could only counter Russia’s overwhelming quantitative superiority in terms of artillery, aviation and naval force by employing more technologically sophisticated equipment provided by NATO. Specifically, this technology should confer three fundamental advantages to balance the Ukrainian numerical disadvantage. On the one hand, the ability to detect targets, engage them and move the artillery pieces that launched the attack (to prevent them from being counter-attacked) in less time than the opponent (as demonstrated at an earlier stage of the war by the Himars batteries). On the other hand, the need for longer range missiles and artillery. Although the Himars batteries, for example, wreaked havoc on the Russian logistic and command and control centers behind the front line, they were subsequently moved out of the approximately 100-kilometer range of the Himars. Therefore, Ukraine sought to obtain from NATO missiles like the German Taurus, with 500 kilometers of range. Finally, these missiles were to be capable of hitting their targets with a significantly higher degree of accuracy than the vast majority of Russian artillery (an accuracy that would allow Ukraine to save relatively scarce ammunition).

The third perspective, on the other hand, indicated that Ukraine’s central offensive would be triggered in the Zaporiyia region, with the aim of disrupting the land bridge built by Russia during the 2022 invasion. This connected the region in eastern Ukraine that Russia has controlled since 2014, known as Dombas, with the Crimean peninsula.

The prospects for success of the Ukrainian counteroffensive lacked any certainty. At one extreme were skeptics, mostly independent analysts,
who stressed that during the late 2022 offensive, under considerably more favorable conditions, Ukraine managed to regain only a small proportion of the territory lost since the start of the war in February 2022. Now, however, conditions were adverse, as Russia took advantage of the time between the two Ukrainian offensives to build deep defenses and provide them with reserves capable of closing any gaps that Ukrainian forces could open through them.

The Russian defenses spanned some 800 kilometers in length and, at some points, were several kilometers deep. Satellite images made public by the BBC offered a glimpse of what Ukrainian forces would face. The photograph showed a first containment line composed of anti-tank ditches, followed by 250 meters of minefield. This was followed by a second line to contain armor, consisting of concrete blocks, followed by 300 meters of minefield. After the latter, fortified trenches were deployed, followed by artillery positions. In places on the front where a Ukrainian counteroffensive was more likely, such as in Zaporijia, this sequence could be repeated more than once.

Moreover, behind these defensive positions, Russia had placed hundreds of thousands of reservists ready to move to the areas of the front where their participation was needed. Skeptics pointed out that, unless it was an amphibious assault in equivalent conditions, there was no more complex task than a joint military operation, that is, with the simultaneous participation of artillery, infantry, armor, aviation, among others, against deep defenses backed by reserves. Stephen Biddle stated that “where defenses have been deep, supported by operational reserves and a well-prepared front, successful blitzkriegs have been virtually impossible after more than a century of technological change.”


For skeptics, the task would prove particularly difficult for an army like the Ukrainian, which lacked previous experience in joint operations: their operations up to that point had been sequential. For example, they would first attack a Russian position with artillery pieces and only then advance on it with infantry forces. Joint operations, on the other hand, required a high degree of synchronization: one should not advance too early (when the opponent still had operational defenses on the battlefield), nor too late (when Russian reserves had already arrived to stop an eventual Ukrainian advance).

It is true that NATO proved that it could succeed in joint operations against such defenses during the first Gulf War. However, its success in Iraq occurred under conditions that did not exist in Ukraine. First, as mentioned, Ukrainian troops lacked previous experience in joint operations. Second, unlike NATO, Ukraine did not enjoy air supremacy or vast superiority in firepower. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that the aggressor tends to suffer more casualties than the defender, even in open terrain, since the latter usually has fortified defensive positions that the former does not possess. Therefore, the attacker generally requires a numerical superiority of three to one, on average, to have a reasonable chance of success, an advantage Ukraine did not have.

The only advantage that NATO had in Iraq and that Ukraine also possessed was, as mentioned, having arsenals of greater technological sophistication, especially in terms of intelligence, range and precision. This aspect constituted one of the arguments of those who maintained relatively optimistic perspectives on the chances of success of the Ukrainian offensive. As for the troop ratio needed to prevail in an offensive, the optimists pointed out that Ukraine did not need a three-to-one force superiority along the entire front line; it required it only at specific points where it decided to attack, provided those attacks succeeded in surprising the opponent and Ukraine maintained pressure at other points along the front. In this way, Ukraine could make significant gains before Russia could mobilize sufficient reserves to the points where the attack was concentrated.
As evidence that such a thing was possible, what happened during the September 2022 Ukrainian offensive in Kharkov was cited. As far as the Russian defensive lines were concerned, NATO had supplied Ukraine with the necessary equipment to overcome just such obstacles. For example, transports and explosives designed to break through concrete blocks, as well as vehicles with shovels to neutralize landmines.

The Lessons of History

Generally speaking, there is a consensus that comparable defensive systems have not been observed since the Allied landings at Normandy during World War II. This historical experience suggests considering certain aspects when evaluating the Ukrainian offensive response. First, it is important to remember that on June 6, 1944, known as “D-Day” when the Normandy landing began, 4,414 Allied soldiers were killed. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the initial cost of any Ukrainian advance would be remarkably high, as intelligence sources would later indicate. It is also relevant to note that, after overcoming the first defensive line on the Normandy beaches, Allied troops did not make significant territorial advances until August 1, 1944, almost two months after the start of the offensive. It is crucial to note, however, that once the last German defensive line was defeated, the subsequent advance was relatively rapid.

Events on the battlefield in contemporary Ukraine suggest a lesson about the role of technology in warfare: it can complement infantry, armor, and artillery, but it cannot replace them. A case in point is that, according to Western intelligence sources, Ukraine identifies most of its targets through drones connected to satellite communication systems, but it is the ground forces that are responsible for attacking those targets, as Ukraine has hardly any aviation or navy capable of operating in the context of warfare.

Balance of the Offensive

Considering these circumstances, it seems unlikely that the Ukrainian counteroffensive will achieve its objective of cutting the land bridge
linking the Dombas to the Crimea. Instead, Ukrainian forces show an inclination toward a strategy of attrition warfare in the hope of resuming the counteroffensive under more favorable conditions in the future. However, this approach poses challenges, as Ukraine’s future war planning is heavily conditioned by a variable over which it has little control: the willingness of NATO member states to continue providing economic and military support. Political changes in some NATO states could negatively affect this assistance.

There is a divergence of opinion on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, even in radical right-wing European and U.S. circles. Generally speaking, however, the strongest support for Russia in the current conflict comes from radical right forces on both continents. Even those factions of the radical right that do not support Russia often highlight the impacts that the war and support for Ukraine have on their citizens, such as increased inflation. Therefore, they may be less likely to maintain that support indefinitely.³

In the case of the U.S., for example, Fox News Channel posed the following question to the Republican pre-candidates for that party’s nomination to assume the presidential nomination for the 2024 election: “Does opposing Russia in Ukraine constitute a vital strategic interest for our nation?”⁴ The answers from the only two pre-candidates with double-digit voting intention in the Republican primaries were extremely revealing. Donald Trump, former U.S. President, responded, “No, but it is for Europe. But not for the United States. That’s why Europe should pay much more than us, or the same”⁵ (in fact, economic and military aid from European countries to Ukraine already exceeds that of the U.S.). Ron DeSantis, current governor of Florida, in turn, responded as follows: “While the United States has many...

³ TE, “The hard right is getting closer to power all over Europe”, The Economist (14 de septiembre de 2023), https://www.economist.com/briefing/2023/09/14/the-hard-right-is-getting-closer-to-power-all-over-europe.
⁵ Ibid.
national interests (...) getting more involved in a territorial dispute between Ukraine and Russia is not one of them”.6

The paradox currently facing Ukraine is that the consensus among its NATO allies to back it indefinitely in a war of attrition is fading. For this reason, it was crucial that the Ukrainian counteroffensive achieve the maximum possible success, thereby increasing the likelihood of ending the conflict. Since this does not appear to be the case, Ukraine cannot take it for granted that it will continue to receive the necessary backing from its NATO allies to launch a new offensive by mid-2024. Indeed, statements by Republican pre-candidates provide incentives for the Russian government to accept Ukraine’s proposed strategy of attrition, presuming that time is in its favor. Evidence of this dynamic is reflected in statements by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, provided to a Western media outlet, where he claims the following:

“(...) Western leaders reiterate (...) that they will support Kiev for as long as it takes (...). That said, the United States does not have the best track record when it comes to backing its allies. Suffice it to recall the abrupt withdrawal of its military aid to South Vietnam in 1973 and to the Ashraf Ghani regime in Afghanistan in 2021, (...) these actions led to the immediate fall of governments loyal to the United States”.7

Conclusions

The Ukrainian counteroffensive, which began in June 2023, finds itself facing considerable challenges, marked by both adverse weather conditions and solid defenses implemented by Russia on the ground. Ukraine’s reliance on NATO-supplied technological equipment presents itself as a necessity in the face of Russian numerical superiority in artillery, aviation and naval force. While some are optimistic about the prospects for success, the lack

---

6 Ibid.
of experience in joint operations and the complexity of the terrain present significant obstacles. Military history, exemplified by the Allied landing at Normandy, suggests that initial breakthroughs can be costly, underscoring the importance of technology as a complement, not a replacement, for ground force. Uncertainty lies in NATO’s continued willingness to provide support, and the breakdown of consensus in NATO to indefinitely back Ukraine poses significant challenges, compounded by international politics, reflecting a possible decline in NATO support, which could dramatically alter the course of the war.

About the author

Farid Kahhat is D. in Government from the University of Texas at Austin. He is currently a professor of International Relations at the Diplomatic Academy of Peru and the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. He also contributes as a columnist on international issues for the newspaper El Comercio and for the web page of the magazine América Economía. Previously, he was a professor of International Relations at the Centro de Docencia e Investigación Económicas in Mexico. He also participated as a commentator on international issues in CNN en Español, was a columnist for the Mexican newspaper Reforma and host of the TV Peru Mundo program in the public channel TV Peru.