

A Turn in the Russo-Ukrainian War?

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The deep Ukrainian offensive into Russia's Kursk Oblast opens a new page in Europe's largest military conflict since 1945.

As becomes clearer with every day since its start, the current Ukrainian foray into the Western Russian Region of Kursk since 6 August 2024 has been no minor incident. Kyiv's unexpected operation on the Russian Federation's state territory could change the character of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Ukraine's attack is a novel development in, at least, six ways.

The War's New Qualities since 6 August

First, it is a classical military offensive being carried out on a large scale by Ukraine's official armed forces. Previous infantry raids into Russian state territory were carried out by the small and semi-regular Free Russia Legion and Russian Volunteer Corps consisting of Russian citizens fighting on Ukraine's side. The recent land invasion into Russia, in contrast, is carried out by large and regular mechanized and combined Ukrainian troops.

This distinction is relevant in both practical and symbolic ways. The current offensive is not, like the previous ones by pro-Ukrainian Russian fighters, a limited and brief incursion into Russia. It is a major Ukrainian military operation involving significant amounts of personnel and employing a range of weaponry.

The previous attacks by the Free Russia Legion and Russian Volunteer Corps were also embarrassing for Moscow. Eventually, they constituted, however, merely short needle pricks from paramilitary units with limited amounts and types of arms. Now the regular Ukrainian army is, in many ways, doing to Russia what the Russian army has been doing to Ukraine since 2014. The symbolism of this new development is – at least, for Ukrainians, Russians and other East Europeans – high.

Second, the first days of the Ukrainian land attack on Russia have been unexpectedly successful for Kyiv. Ukraine's troops reportedly managed to occupy around 1000 square kilometers of strategically important Russian state territory while losing, during this initial phase, only a limited amount of its soldiers and equipment. Ukrainian forces captured 28 settlements including the administrative district center of Sudzha.

Though being an only small town of about 5000 citizens, Sudzha was, until 6 August, important for the Russian army as a logistic hub. In the late Tsarist period, Sudzha had been a largely Ukrainian-speaking settlement. In 1918, Sudzha was for about a month the first capital of the emerging Ukrainian Soviet republic.

Sudzha also hosts a Gazprom metering station through which all of Russia's remaining onshore natural gas transportation to the EU is running. This fact has apparently been responsible for nervous reactions on European markets where gas prices have risen since 6 August. However, the fears behind such hikes appear as overblown.

Gas pumped via Sudzha has, during the entire war since its beginning in 2014, been continuously flowing via Ukraine to Slovakia and from there further into Central Europe. Both Moscow and Kyiv have been so far and presumably will continue to be commercially interested to uphold the remaining Russian-EU gas trade. This has meant and may also mean in the future that military developments around Gazprom's transportation infrastructure – whether on Ukrainian or Russian state territory – do not necessarily constitute hindrances to mutually profitable gas flows, as strange as this may sound.

Four Further Specifics of Ukraine's Incursion

Third, the Ukrainian invasion into Russia since 6 August 2024 has led to the largest and quickest change of the war's frontline since the last Ukrainian liberations of Russia-controlled territory in Ukraine's Kharkiv and Kherson regions in autumn 2022. Until recently, all Russian and Ukrainian territorial gains or losses since then had been smaller and less significant than the current one. For the first time in a long period, the map of the front between Russia and Ukraine looks significantly different.

Fourth, Ukraine's Kursk incursion can be seen as the belated implementation of the much-discussed Ukrainian counteroffensive that had stalled in 2023. A year ago, a Ukrainian retaliation attack was unsuccessfully attempted on Ukrainian soil whereas now it is being – at least initially – more successfully attempted on Russian lands. With the Ukrainian troops' relatively deep incursion into Western Russia, the war has become less of an attrition and again more of a maneuver war.

Fifth and perhaps most importantly, the land warfare between Russia and Ukraine has, with this week's Kursk incursion, switched from a confrontation almost exclusively playing out on Ukrainian terrain to one now being fought on both countries' legal state territories. It has already after the first days of its implementation become a source of embarrassment and distraction for the Kremlin. This will be especially important, if the Ukrainian advance into Russia turns out to be not only a short episode but becomes a prolonged phenomenon. In such a case, Kyiv's redirection of its defensive warfare on to Russian soil will have paradigmatic as well as strategic and not only operational or tactical meaning.

Sixth, the – at least, initially – successful and now several days ongoing Ukrainian land invasion of Russia's legitimate state territory poses the question of the meaning of the Russian military doctrine's statements and, since 2022, frequent oral threats concerning use of nuclear weapons. On 6 August 2024, the Ukrainian army supposedly committed its, so far, gravest sin against the Russia's sovereignty and integrity, with the start of an incursion into Russia's internationally recognized state territory. Yet, during the following first week of Kyiv's fast offensive, no warnings about use of nuclear escalation were issued by Moscow. Instead,

the Kremlin announced an “anti-terrorist operation” under the command of the internal intelligence service FSB (Federal Security Service) – thereby apparently downgrading the regular Ukrainian army’s deep foray in the Kursk Oblast to an ordinary national security threat.

The Kremlin’s New Challenges

For Moscow, the new Ukrainian strategy, even with its currently limited achievements, makes further planning, conduct and presentation of Russia’s expansionist war against Ukraine more complicated. In view of what has been happening since 6 August, Russia will have to keep and deploy more troops on its own rather than Ukraine’s state territory. Reversing, preventing, and deterring the current Kursk and possible other Ukrainian counterattacks on Russian soil has become a new strategic task for Russia’s general staff.

As an instrument of Moscow’s external affairs, the Russian armed forces have, until recently, been focused on fighting for and in foreign lands – whether in Moldova, Georgia, Syria, Ukraine or other countries. This exclusively offensive, interventionist or/and irredentist period of deployment of Russia’s regular and irregular armed forces against external enemies is now over. It is being replaced by the novel task of combining the defense of legitimate Russian state territory with interventions, in the former Soviet space and elsewhere.

Kyiv’s New Intentions

For Kyiv, the incursion into the Kursk Oblast is, among others, a diversionary move designed to tie up, within a Russian western border region, troops that would otherwise be attacking, ravaging and terrorizing Ukraine. The Ukrainian motivation behind the attack could have, moreover, been to influence Russia’s domestic and foreign affairs. Kyiv is apparently trying to undermine the Kremlin’s political reputation, propaganda strategy, and information policy among both, the Russian population and international community – with in the West or beyond.

Kyiv hopes that the various Russian administrative lapses that led to the Ukrainian military success on Russian soil will become problematic for Putin’s standing within, above all, the Russian political elite and pro-Russian groups around the world. Most domestic and international support for Putin is less driven by genuine attraction to Putinism or a serious belief in Russian narratives about the threats of NATO expansion, “Ukrainian fascism,” Western subversion etc. It has been instead informed by cynical respect for the apparent success of Putin’s ruthless, nihilistic and seemingly efficacious domestic and foreign conduct. The unexpectedly deep and, so far, successful Ukrainian incursion into the Russian Federation since 6 August and the sudden loser image of Moscow vis-à-vis Kyiv creates, among such audiences, cognitive dissonance.

The unexpected success of the Ukrainian attack since 6 August 2024 illustrates once more Russia’s strategic inaptitude, administrative deficiencies, and material arrears. These weaknesses had already become apparent in 2022, during the unsuccessful Russian attack on Kyiv in spring and successful Ukrainian counterattack in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions in autumn. The current Ukrainian operation undermines again the popular narrative of Russia’s alleged invincibility and superiority – a mirage often propagated to advocate a Russian *Siegfrieden* (victor’s peace) with Ukrainian territorial cessions to end the war.

Conclusions

The new offensiveness and risk-affinity of Ukraine's behavior in the war is less a reaction to Russian aggressiveness. Instead, it is the result of now 10-year-long timidity, laziness or absence of global help for Kyiv in its, until 6 August, largely defensive war. Iraq's 1990 annexation of Kuwait was quickly reversed by an international coalition, within one year. In the 1990s, Serbia's irredentism was, after some hesitation, resolutely subdued with an out-of-area mission by NATO forces. In contrast, international support for the embattled Ukrainian state has been not only just indirect, but also dubiously slow and weak. That was in spite of such scandalous early events, in the war, as Russia's official annexation of Crimea on 18 March 2014 or shooting down of Malaysian flight MH-17 with 298 civilians, including 80 children, on board, on 17 July 2014.

Western economic sanctions against Russia and military as well as other support for Ukraine have become, it is true, ever more significant since 2022. Yet, they have remained and still remain gravely insufficient to defend Ukraine's territory, citizenry, and infrastructure from Russia's genocidal attack. Worse, many private companies of the West and countries of the Global South fuel Russia's annihilation war by their direct or indirect trade with the aggressor. Western decisions in support of Ukraine's defense continue to be taken slowly, hesitantly, and half-heartedly. In response, after two-and-half years of much death and suffering during the full-scale Russian invasion, Kyiv now wants to fundamentally change the war's character and context. Whatever the outcome of the recent incursion, Kyiv will continue to try using various means to demonstrate to international audiences that the development and end of the war remain open-ended, and that the assumption of unquestionable Russian dominance is misleading.

A further obvious intention of the Ukrainian strategy is to reframe possible future negotiations with the Kremlin about territorial issues. For instance, there may be larger multilateral talks during the second big international conference on the war following the first July 2024 Peace Summit in Switzerland. In addition to continued Ukrainian voicing of moral, normative and legal arguments, Kyiv can – if it manages to hold on to the captured Russian lands – now follow a new approach. In both its direct communication with Moscow or/and at international conferences, Ukraine's leadership will now be able to also make transactional proposals suggesting an exchange of captured Russian lands for annexed Ukrainian territory.

To be sure, Kyiv's new approach is hazardous for both Ukrainian and international security. The recent new events can develop in various directions. The Ukrainian invasion of Russia on 6 August 2024 have, in Vladimir Putin's words, "created a large-scale provocation." Those foreign observers who agree with Putin's definition should, however, first of all blame their own countries' limited or absent interest in Ukraine's sovereignty and integrity. It is the insufficient international help for Ukraine's restoration of its borders since 2014 and continuing large-scale trade of many countries with Russia that has led Kyiv to switch from its earlier largely defensive approach to an offensive stance.

Whatever the outcome of Ukraine's current operation in the Kursk region, Kyiv will continue to look for weak points along the entire perimeter of contact with the Russian state as well as among its allies, agents, and proxies. Russia will have to invest in fortifying the Russian-Ukrainian border and to pay more attention to other theatres of the war than Ukraine's east and south. The Ukrainian foray into Russian state territory deconstructs the image – inside Russia and around the world – of a seemingly static frontline, stable force constellation, and predictable course of the conflict.



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