



It's Time for the West to Embrace Ukraine's Way of War, Not Doubt It

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Ukrainian forces have adapted. Ukraine's military decision-making is sound. Now is not the time for Western doubt but for the West to embrace Ukraine's way of war and commit to sustaining Ukraine's initiative on the battlefield.

The summer 2023 Ukrainian counteroffensive faced a major challenge after Russia had months to build up its defenses in occupied Ukraine. The culmination of Ukraine's 2022 counteroffensives — the first being the liberation of Kharkiv, followed by the Kherson offensive, attributable in no small part to the delayed provision of Western military aid — allowed Russia to build its defense in depth and prevented Ukraine from launching a third phase of its counteroffensive in winter 2022–2023.

But the Ukrainian forces have done what successful militaries do — they have adapted and are now advancing. Ukraine recognized the realities of Russian defenses much faster than Western policymakers, who were expecting a rapid Ukrainian breakthrough. ISW previously wrote in July that Ukrainian forces had adapted their tactics after they encountered initial setbacks and were increasingly successful in using small infantry assaults backed by precision fires to make inroads against Russian defenses.¹

Ukraine's ingenuity is yielding results. Ukraine maintains the battlefield initiative and its forces are advancing in Zaporizhia Oblast and near Bakhmut. Ukraine continues to liberate its territory and people and is slowly but steadily breaking through an incredibly formidable Russian prepared defense — and the Russian forces are unable to stop the advance, which is now moving in two directions.

Additionally, Ukrainian asymmetrical tactics in the Black Sea are preventing Russia's Black Sea Fleet from operating freely, forcing Russia to reposition naval assets, and increasingly challenging Russian forces in Crimea — all operational developments of strategic significance.²

Ukraine's way of war has yielded repeated successes against Russian forces. Ukrainian forces have, with Western support, defeated Russian objectives repeatedly: in Kyiv, in Kharkiv, in Kharkiv Oblast, in Kherson, and now, to a growing extent, in Ukraine's south. Ukraine has prevented Russian forces from establishing air dominance and is eroding Russian naval superiority and increasingly making the Russian military's presence less tenable in Crimea — realities that were previously unthinkable to many.

Ukraine's adaptive decision-making in the current counteroffensive is enabling the

Ukrainian advance and preventing Russia from accumulating enough forces to defend against a potential breakthrough. Ukrainian decision-making has not been flawless — and neither has the West's, for that matter. However, Ukrainian adaptations to battlefield realities, especially when considering the immense constraints Ukraine is operating under, have been effective. Ukraine's decision to pivot away from the type of large-scale mechanized breaches that its counteroffensive brigades were trained by NATO to perform, in hindsight, has enabled Ukraine's progress.

Ukraine's decision to keep pressure on Russian forces throughout the entire frontline instead of focusing all of Ukraine's combat power on one line of attack in the direction of Melitopol, which some Western advisors preferred, was a good adaptation. Ukraine's decision to hold and conduct counterattacks in Bakhmut allowed it to pin down a substantial portion of the combat power of Russia's relatively elite airborne (VDV) forces and deny the creation of a strategic Russian reserve.³ The recent Ukrainian advances in Zaporizhia Oblast are likely forcing the Russians to laterally redeploy their units away from around Bakhmut, where Ukrainian forces are advancing too.⁴

The United States should embrace its partnership with a competent ally who also leads. We are used to partners that require us to lead — from proxy forces we trained to our allies who rely on us for security. In Ukraine, however, the United States has a partner that is leading on the battlefield and knows its operational environment, its enemy, and its own capabilities and limitations. The Ukrainians have repeatedly demonstrated that they understand this war and can adapt. Most importantly, Ukraine still maintains a relentless will to fight.

Now is not the time for Western doubt. The West must reinforce its military and diplomatic commitments and lean in to help sustain Ukraine's battlefield momentum. Ukraine is still facing an existential challenge from Russia, which requires Western aid to militarily defeat.

Leaning in means embracing Ukraine's campaign design.

It means ensuring that the Western training of Ukrainian troops is done in conditions in which Ukraine fights at its best.

It means accelerating the development and delivery of specific capabilities that Ukraine needs with two goals: delaying the culmination of Ukraine's current counteroffensive to ensure it achieves its maximum possible effect (maximally liberates critical terrain, depletes Russia's capabilities, and forces Russia into suboptimal force allocations across the frontline to expose Russian forces to new lines of counterattacks) and setting conditions for the current counteroffensive's follow-on phase. Ukraine's supporters must empower Ukraine to prevent Russian forces from enjoying a breather on the battlefield in winter 2023–2024 as they did in winter 2022–2023.

The West should also reframe expectations about how Ukraine's weather conditions in the fall and winter may affect the prospects for the Ukrainian counteroffensive. Ukrainian operations can and will likely continue even in rain and mud, even if they occur at a slower pace. Ukraine can intensify its pace again when muddy conditions end in the spring of 2024 if the West provides Ukraine proper support. The key is denying

Russia the reprieve it desperately needs over the winter. Last year the West did not proactively resource Ukrainian momentum after Ukraine's successful counteroffensives in the Kharkiv region and Kherson in 2022, which allowed Russia to regroup and dig in. We must learn from that mistake.

The West should also help shape strategic communications to set proper expectations around Ukraine's progress. Ukraine can win this war militarily, but it will take more than one counteroffensive operation. It will take as many campaigns as it takes for Ukraine to liberate its territory and its people. The West should be prepared to support them all because the fundamentals shaping this conflict have not changed: Ukraine can win this war, Russia can only be defeated on the battlefield, and what is at stake includes Ukraine's existence and vital US interests.

The West embracing Ukraine's way of war is key to preserving the dominance of Western and Ukrainian decision-making. The Kremlin is trying to slow or impair Western and Ukrainian decision-making — one of the few ways in which Russian President Vladimir Putin can advance his objectives. Slowed Western decision-making resulting in lagging military aid deliveries can provide Russia with relief. Giving Russia such relief — be it at the operational (winter 2022–2023) or strategic level (the years between Russia's first and second invasions of Ukraine) — proved catastrophic. Given the gift of time, Russia will regroup and attack again. However, Russia's Achilles heel remains its inability to rapidly pivot when faced with relentless pressure or consecutive setbacks. Faced with constant pressure over time with no relief, the Russians will likely start to crack. This is the effect Ukraine's current counteroffensive strategy is seeking to achieve, and it can only be realized if the West embraces Ukraine's way of war for this phase of the counteroffensive and beyond.

¹ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ukraine%E2%80%99s-sustained-counteroffensive-denying-russia%E2%80%99s-prolongation-war>

² <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-22-2023>

³ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ukraine%E2%80%99s-operations-bakhmut-have-kept-russian-reserves-away-south>

⁴ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-1-2023>