Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 19.05.2023 www.osw.waw.pl

Ukrainians maintain the initiative at Bakhmut. Day 449 of the war

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Ukrainian troops are continuing offensive operations west of Bakhmut. The fighting is mainly focused on the hills between Ivanivske and Klishchiivka; the Russians are slowly being pushed back toward the latter village, which they captured four months ago. The Ukrainians are also attacking on a 10-kilometre front line running from Orikhovo-Vasylivka to Khromove. The advances on the field are small, averaging a few hundred metres a day; the Russian regular army units are taking the fight to the enemy, and (except in isolated cases) not showing panic or abandoning their positions. At the same time, on the western outskirts of Bakhmut, Wagner Group assault troops are attempting to capture the last Ukrainian holdouts (it is estimated that only a small chunk of the town is still under the defenders' control). Local clashes are continuing along other sections of the front. There have also been no reports of either side bringing their operational or strategic reserves to the fight in recent days. At the same time, according to Russian semi-official military channels (the so-called 'war bloggers'), two Ukrainian corps (the 9th and 10th) were concentrated in Zaporizhzhia and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts in May. These were formed back in the winter, and the brigades they comprise have received training at Ukrainian and foreign training grounds, and have largely been equipped with Western-made heavy equipment.

Much was made in the media of the events of the night of 15–16 May, when the Russians used Kinzhal hypersonic missiles (among other weapons) to attack Kyiv; before the outbreak of war, Russian propaganda presented these weapons as being capable of breaking through every anti-missile system in the world. As Ukrainian and Western media reported, there was slight damage to elements of the Patriot system defending Kyiv, caused by parts of the downed missiles falling to earth. According to a statement from the US Department of Defense, the damage was quickly repaired without the need to take the equipment abroad.

Over the past two days, the Russians have continued their intensive attacks on the Ukrainian rear, using various combinations of rockets and kamikaze drones. On the night of 16-17 May, at least two Kalibr-type missiles hit facilities in Mykolaiv. According to the Ukrainian side, civilian infrastructure was destroyed, while according to the Russians, ammunition storage facilities located on industrial sites were destroyed. According to a communiqué from the Ukrainian Air Force Command, on the night of 17–18 May the Russians launched 30 missiles (6 Kalibrs, 22 Kh-101/Kh-555 cruise missiles and 2 Iskander-K missiles), 29 of which were shot down; one Kh-101/Kh-555 missile hit a target in Khmelnytskyi oblast. In addition, as a result of the fall of a downed missile, an 'industrial facility' in Odesa was

destroyed. On the other hand, on the night of 18–19 May, Ukrainian anti-aircraft defences claimed to have neutralised 16 out of 22 attacking Shahed-136/131 kamikaze drones and three of the six Kalibr missiles. Once again, Kyiv's air defence demonstrated 100 percent effectiveness, according to the Ukrainian side, although the Russians succeeded in hitting facilities in Kryvyi Rih.

In addition to directing kamikaze drones and missiles at targets located in the deep rear of the Ukrainian military, the invaders have continued attacking towns in the frontline zone, with guided bombs, Smerch multi-launcher missile launchers and S-300 missiles. In recent days, the main targets have been towns at the back of the frontline in the Donbas (principally Kostiantynivka) as well as Kherson and the villages surrounding it.

On 18 May, Norway announced that it would supply Ukraine with three ARTHUR artillery radars, and hand over to the UK eight decommissioned older versions of the M270 multi-mission rocket launchers, which do not have the capability to fire precision-guided munitions (GMLRS). This will allow London to give Ukraine its newer M270A1 launchers without losing its own capabilities (the Norwegian vehicles will be upgraded in the future). On the same basis Kyiv already received three M270A1 launchers from the UK in 2022.

According to Reuters, the Biden administration allegedly erred in calculating the value of military aid which the US has provided to Ukraine, resulting in an overestimate of more than $3 billion. This mainly concerns armaments and military equipment drawdown from Department of Defense stock inventories under the Presidential Drawdown Authority. This means that Biden has more funds left in the current budget for military aid to Ukraine.

Belgium and the Netherlands have offered Britain assistance in training Ukrainian pilots for F-16s, while still rejecting the possibility of giving Kyiv their own aircraft. The US Air Force, on the other hand, after testing two Ukrainian pilots who had experience with Su-27s and MiG-29s, determined that training them to fly F-16s could (after tailoring their training appropriately) take as little as 17 weeks, rather than the 18 months that had previously been assumed.

The increased missile attacks on Kyiv have highlighted the danger posed by how the Russians obtain military information. On 17 May, the Security Service of Ukraine detained six people who reported the air defence's activity during attacks on the capital live on social networks, thus revealing the location and specifics of Ukrainian air defences. In addition, the SBU ordered local authorities to disable city surveillance cameras after repeated attempts by Russian hackers to access the system. Ukraine's Air Force Commander Yuri Ihnat admitted that it is difficult to guarantee the safe monitoring of commercial facilities, gas stations or residential buildings. He appealed to residents to follow the authorities' instructions and not to publish information about the activity of Ukrainian forces. Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, recalled that such individuals would be held criminally responsible.

On 16 May Kyrylo Budanov, the head of Ukraine's military intelligence service (HUR), said that in his assessment the enemy forces had lost the ability to conduct serious offensive operations, but still have well-developed defensive positions. He added that the invaders had committed some 370,000 troops, more than 20,000 troops from the National Guard and some 7000 people from various paramilitary formations to military operations. A day later,

Budanov referred to his controversial statement that Russians would be killed in every corner of the world. He stated that the media had reported his remark inaccurately; in fact, when he spoke of “liquidation” he was referring to war criminals, not all Russians.

On 16 May, Ukraine officially became a full member of NATO’s Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) in Tallinn. The decision to admit it was taken by 27 NATO countries back in March 2022. The centre is a NATO-accredited analytical institution dealing with cyber security issues.

On 17 May, Belarus’ representative to the UN Valiantsin Rybakou said that Russia has not so far provided Minsk with any tactical nuclear weapons. He stressed that if any decision is made in this regard, it will be “a decision by the Belarusian government, not any other country”. In turn, independent Belarusian media confirmed that anti-tank engineering barrages have been deployed on major roads near the Belarus-Ukraine border. One of the lines of fortifications is located on the M8 highway, 10 km south of Homiel. On the same day, the Russians redeployed eight Su-34 and two Su-30 fighter jets from an airfield near Baranovichi to the Machulishchy airfield, which is closer to the Ukrainian border.

On 18 May the occupying authorities in Crimea confirmed incidents of Ukrainian sabotage. A train carrying was grain derailed as a result of the destruction of a track in the Simferopol region with an explosive charge. A day later, a Ukrainian drone cut power cables that fell on the tracks near the town of Dzhankoi. HUR representative Andriy Yusov indicated that the rail routes are being used to transport weapons, ammunition, armoured vehicles and other equipment used in the occupation of territories in southern Ukraine. According to British military intelligence, the destruction of railroad lines in Crimea could disrupt the supply of Kalibr missiles to the Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol.

Commentary

- The Ukrainian offensive operations near Bakhmut, which have been underway for the past ten days, are limited in nature and are being carried out by brigades that have been fighting in the area for at least a couple of weeks, without resorting to operational or strategic retreats. The Ukrainians have been able to seize the initiative thanks to the progressive weakening of the Wagner Group, resulting from the losses it has sustained and the release from its ranks of criminals who have served six months and (as stipulated in their contracts) been granted their freedom. The defenders are also taking advantage of the confusion caused by the Wagner forces’ handover of more sections of the front to regular army troops. Ukraine’s actions are being aided by the open conflict between Yevgeny Prigozhin and the leadership of the Russian defence ministry. It seems that the goal of the Ukrainian operation now is to tie down as many enemy forces as possible in the Bakhmut area by attacking the Wagner troops in the hills around the city.