

New tasks for the Ukrainian army. Day 719 of the war

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 The situation on the frontline

Russian forces have expanded the area they control in the north-west of Avdiivka, cutting off the centre from the coke and chemical plant. Fighting continues for the industrial area between the railway line and the Industrial Avenue, the artery that forms the western border of the town, and which also serves as the supply route for the group defending it (hereafter referred to as road O0542). According to some sources, it has already become effectively impossible to use the route. Considering the invaders' advances south-west of Avdiivka, the city is now in an operational encirclement (apart from the area around the plant, which lies outside the ring of encirclement). The distance between the points controlled by the invaders has shrunk to 3 km at its narrowest point, and they only need around 300–700m to physically cross the Industrial Avenue.

The new Ukrainian army command has reportedly decided to redeploy additional forces near Avdiivka and maintain the town's defences. Ukrainian sources say that this concerns the elite 3rd Assault Brigade, which currently remains in reserve; in the summer counterattack at Bakhmut, it repelled the enemy troops from the Donetsk-Donbas canal and approached the town. Together with the 47th Mechanised Brigade, which is already engaged in the battle for Avdiivka, it would make an assault on the northern flank of the enemy forces, thus drawing them away from the defenders' supply route. However, this move runs the risk of getting the only strong retreat in Donetsk oblast entangled in the fighting, something the previous command (headed by General Valerii Zaluzhnyi) was said to have feared. It is still unclear whether a possible Ukrainian counterattack at Avdiivka would push back the enemy enough to allow the town to continue to be defended. It is more likely that it would facilitate the evacuation of the garrison (manned by soldiers of the 110th Mechanised Brigade), which has been exhausted by the prolonged clashes.

Aware of the possibility of a Ukrainian counterattack at Avdiivka, **the Russian command has intensified its operations in the remaining directions in the arc west of Donetsk city**, with the aim of dispersing the defenders' efforts. The invaders have made field gains in the village of Pervomayske on Avdiivka's south-western flank; west and south of Marinka, where they entered Hryhorivka and (once again) Novomykhailivka; and west of Bakhmut. It has also made slight advances in other directions: east of Siversk, west of Kreminna and north-east & south-east of Kupyansk, as well as south of Orikhiv in Zaporizhzhia oblast. According to a report from the Ukrainian General Staff, the high frequency of attacks continues, with

the number fluctuating around 100 per day. On 9 February, the invaders were said to have stormed the defenders' positions 111 times.

The Russians are apparently obstructing Ukrainian communications with Starlink terminals, which so far have been the only communications equipment not affected by interference from hostile electronic warfare systems. According to Ukrainian military intelligence, the Russians are using the same equipment for this purpose, which has been acquired in Arab countries. The use of an increased number of Starlinks is expected to lead to overloads and a decrease in data rates in a zone up to 20 km from the line of contact.

Russian air attacks

On 7 February, the invaders launched another massive missile attack. Damage was reported from Kyiv, where four civilians were killed and 40 wounded, as well as from Drohobych, Mykolaiv, Novomoskovsk in Dnipropetrovsk oblast and from Poltava oblast. Russian missiles also struck Kharkiv on the same day. Local Ukrainian sources reported that **the enemy had used new types of missiles.** According to the Kyiv military administration, they first used a 3M22 Zircon hypersonic missile and, according to the police in Kharkiv, KN-23 missiles of North Korean origin (Hwasong-11Ga models, similar in design to Russian Iskanders). These reports have not yet been confirmed by Ukrainian military sources. In contrast, the Americans have also reported the use of Korean missiles by the invaders (nine of them have hit targets in Ukraine since the beginning of the year). In total, on 7 February the invaders used 51 missiles (of which the defenders claimed to have shot down 31) and 20 kamikaze drones (15 downed).

Heavy damage was caused by attacks on a fuel base in Kharkiv on 10 February and on energy infrastructure in Dnipropetrovsk oblast two days later. The explosion and fire at the fuel base led to the destruction of surrounding residential buildings; seven civilians were killed and 50 injured. In Dnipropetrovsk oblast, the impact cut power supplies to an unspecified number of industrial consumers and 53,000 individual users. Kharkiv was attacked twice more between 8 and 12 February, as was Odesa, and Mykolaiv was attacked three times. Enemy rockets or drones also struck Dnipro, Kropyvnytskyi, Izmail and Shepetivka, as well as other locations in the Dnipropetrovsk, Kyiv, Mykolaiv, Vinnytsia and Zhytomyr oblasts and frontline areas. In total, during the period in question the invaders used 25 missiles (the Ukrainians announced the shooting down of two) and 126 Shaheds (98 downed).

In an attack carried out on the night of 13 February, one of the heating & power plants in Dnipropetrovsk oblast was severely damaged. The main target was the city of Dnipro. The Russians were said to have used 23 kamikaze drones; the defenders claimed to have shot down 16 of them.

Ukrainian operations against Russia

On 9 February, Ukrainian drones struck the Ilska and Afipska refineries in Krasnodar krai. In the former, a fire was said to have damaged the main processing plant. The unmanned

drone that attacked the second (which was previously targeted in October 2023) is unlikely to have done any damage. Ukrainian media attributed the organisation of the attack to the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU).

Ukraine's military potential

On 8 February Volodymyr Zelensky dismissed Valery Zaluzhnyi as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, and in his place appointed the former commander of the Land Forces, Oleksandr Syrskyi (see '[Zelensky dismisses General Zaluzhnyi](#)'). In the following days, the President carried out comprehensive personnel changes in the General Staff and among senior commanders (see '[Personnel revolution in the Ukrainian armed forces](#)').

On 8 February, Zelensky presented the new top commanders with a list of the changes he expects in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. It includes:

- a “realistic, detailed plan of action” for 2024, taking into account the current situation on the frontline and the prospects for how it could be changed;
- equipping each fighting brigade with effective Western weapons (there should be an “equitable redistribution” of these to front-line units);
- solving logistical problems (“Avdiivka should not have to wait until the generals realise where the drones have been stuck in their depots”);
- basing generalship on experienced frontliners (“Every general must know the front. If a general does not know the front, he does not serve Ukraine”);
- correcting excessive and unjustified staff numbers;
- building an effective system of compulsory rotation based on the experience of selected brigades of the Ukrainian army and subunits of the State Border Guard Service (“rotations are a must”);
- a clear improvement in the quality of soldier training (“only trained soldiers on the front line”);
- the appointment of the first commander of the Unmanned Systems Force, a newly formed type of armed force.

A day later, the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief formulated the tasks facing the army on this basis:

- clear and detailed planning of the activities of command structures at all levels, taking into account the needs of the frontline for new armaments from external partners;
- directing logistics towards the fastest and most rational distribution of supplies;
- to know all the needs of the frontline, and to be in control of the situation on every section of it;
- maintaining a balance between the execution of combat tasks and the reconstitution of units while intensifying training (“the life and health of the soldiers is the main value of the army”);

- the introduction of new technical solutions and the dissemination of those that have yielded positive results (such as the use of unmanned systems and electronic warfare).

The list presented by the President mostly coincides with the demands which at least part of the military and expert communities have been making for many months. However, these changes, which General Syrskyi has reformulated into tasks, are primarily declarations of intent. It will not be possible to implement them without the fulfilment of conditions over which Kyiv has little influence, such as the supply of armaments, military equipment and war *matériel* in the broadest sense from the West. Without these, it will be impossible not only to prepare the fighting units adequately, but also to ensure the smooth delivery and use of supplies.

The growing mobilisation crisis is also an important constraint (see '[On the threshold of a third year of war. Ukraine's mobilisation crisis](#)'). There is a shortage of people willing to serve, which means frontline units cannot be replenished. This means that the concepts of compulsory rotation and the intensification of training should currently be treated as purely theoretical. Revising organisational measures could achieve the objective of improving the work of the headquarters; reducing their staff would also allow surplus personnel to be redirected to frontline service.

The Government and the General Staff of Ukraine will develop the bases for the formation of an Unmanned Systems Force, as the President instructed them to do in his decree of 6 February. This new type of armed forces is expected to increase the army's ability to use air, sea and land-based unmanned and robotic systems.

On 9 February Mykhailo Podolak, an adviser to the head of the President's Office, stated that the state leadership expected General Syrskyi to audit the national potential for mobilisation. He added that about one million people had been mobilised, although only 300,000 of them are in the combat zone.

On 8 February, the police chief's office decided to disband the special purpose regiment stationed in Dnipro; all those serving in the unit will be sent to the Liut police assault brigade. Officers who refuse to obey the order will be dismissed and given military appointments. The squad's disbandment is a reaction to the events of 4 February, when some police officers from a *spetsnaz* regiment publicly refused to transfer to an assault brigade operating in the Bakhmut area. This breach of discipline signals that motivation to fight on the frontline is declining in some formations as the conflict moves into its third year.

The war and the internal situation in Ukraine

On 8 February, the border police foiled a record attempt to smuggle military evaders. Two minibuses were stopped near the border with Hungary; their drivers were trying to smuggle out 38 men from 11 different regions of the country. The organisers of the illegal transport had planned to receive between \$4500 and \$8500 each from their clients. A day earlier, the SBU announced the detention of five persons from Lviv, Cherkasy, Khmelnytskyi and Zakarpattia oblasts who had been involved in smuggling out men evading service.

Also on 8 February, 100 Ukrainian prisoners of war were release thanks to the mediation of the United Arab Emirates; most of them were defenders of Mariupol. This was the 51st exchange of prisoners of war since February 2022; a total of 3135 people have so far been returned from Russian captivity.

