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Ukraine: belated expansion of the fortification system

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In February and March, Ukrainian state institutions started reporting that work had begun on constructing fortifications, including anti-tank ditches, obstacles and platoon resistance points, which will eventually be combined into an integrated defence system. Russian sources have also confirmed this by posting drone photos of Ukrainian field fortifications on social media. Information on the locations of these fortified areas and the tenders to build the fortifications has been kept secret. Available data shows that the main effort has been concentrated along the frontline in the Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Kharkiv oblasts and along the sensitive section of the border with Russia that stretches from the Kharkiv area to the Seym river.

The construction work follows the orders that President Volodymyr Zelensky announced on 30 November 2023. The government has also set up a special headquarters which is responsible for planning the work and preparing the necessary construction materials and heavy equipment. It is headed by deputy prime minister Mykhailo Fedorov and defence minister Rustem Umerov. The fortifications will consist of two 'prongs': sapper subunits will handle the task in the defensive belt of the individual operational groups, and the military, the regional administrations and construction companies will work together to erect the fortifications within a few dozen kilometres of the battle line.

Commentary

- The course of the Ukrainian-Russian war to date has highlighted the great importance of field fortifications, especially for the side which is defending outside the urban areas. The experience of the Ukrainian offensive in the Zaporizhzhia region in the summer of 2023 is the most striking example of this. One of the most important factors that contributed to the offensive's failure was the skilfully constructed and deeply fortified Russian defence system, which was based on extensive minefields, anti-tank obstacles and earthworks for the infantry. Due to the high concentration of artillery and attack drones on the battlefield, defensive operations conducted in open terrain without at least rudimentary field fortifications shielded from aerial surveillance have led to significant losses in the infantry and its consequent demoralisation.
- The failure to build field fortifications has been criticised in Ukraine since at least late 2022, when it emerged that despite months of fighting on the outskirts of Bakhmut and Soledar, positions on the wings of these two cities had not been prepared in advance for defence, which resulted in unnecessary losses. A much stronger wave of discontent swept through the media in the second half of February this year, when Ukrainian infantry

had to dig in along an improvised line of defence under Russian artillery and drone fire after retreating from Avdiivka. This showed that Zelensky's decision to expand the fortifications in November 2023 had come at least several months too late.

- The main problems related to the current efforts to erect fortifications include the limited possibilities to carry out this work in the belt up to 15–20 km from the frontline, as this area is within the range of Russian field artillery and reconnaissance & attack drones. Consequently, the Russian forces are able to locate heavy equipment on the roads very quickly, which runs a high risk of its being destroyed. Therefore, small, dispersed working groups have been carrying out the work in the immediate vicinity of the frontline; this work is mainly being carried out by hand, which affects the pace of construction. The most important contractor for these works is the State Transport Special Service, a formation of the engineering troops that until now has mainly been responsible for securing the transport routes and for demining. This unit has been expanded during the war, but it appears to be unable to erect large-scale fortifications on its own, which means that civilian companies have to be involved in this process. The Russian forces used a similar organisational solution to erect their own defensive lines starting in late 2022.
- If Ukraine succeeds in building an integrated fortification system which is reinforced with minefields and provides protection for the key transport nodes, then its defence potential should improve, which will significantly reduce the threat of a major Russian advance. It is vitally important for Ukraine to prepare its positions along the Vuhledar-Kurakhove-Pokrovsk-Kostiantynivka-Kramatorsk-Sloviansk line, the current focus of Russia's attacks in the Donbas. At the same time, it should be stressed that fortifications do not defend themselves; they will require adequate manning and firepower. Therefore, the construction of such fortifications will not eliminate the need to carry out a full-fledged mobilisation and reinforce the military with new recruits.