

Policy Backgrounder: Ukraine's Offensive into Kursk

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One month after Ukraine's surprise invasion of Russia's Kursk region, the attack has helped change the dynamics of the war. It carries risks, but it also permits Ukraine to change the narrative of the war, from being constantly on the defensive to making a major counteroffensive push during the summer fighting season and boosting Ukrainian morale and Western perceptions of the war.

- Ukraine currently controls up to 1,294 square kilometers of Russian territory. It does not intend to keep this permanently but instead to use it as a military "buffer zone" and a bargaining chip to convince Russia to end the war and to exchange prisoners (very important for Ukraine).
- The invasion has also had an impact in Russia itself, highlighting the use of conscript troops and Russian weakness in sectors beyond the immediate frontline. At the same time, however, Russia is also continuing advances in eastern Ukraine, though slowly and at great cost.
- The changed circumstances raise the likelihood of eventual peace talks, in which countries including China and India could play a significant role.

A Surprise Attack Changes the War Narrative

On August 6, Ukraine carried out a surprise attack in the border region of Kursk, advancing quickly, destroying three [bridges](#), and holding nearly 1300 square kilometers of territory including 100 towns and villages. The region was lightly defended, and Russian soldiers [reportedly](#) surrendered quickly as their commanders abandoned them; in total Ukraine has captured almost 600 Russian [prisoners of war](#). Ukraine [insists](#) that it planned the operation without telling the US, fearing leaks or discouragement from Western partners.

The attack has had an impact among the Ukrainian people, changing the tone of the war from a purely defensive action in which Russia simply grinds out more territory to one in which Ukraine can be on the offensive as well. It expands the front, normally not something a defender wants to do to stretch lines further, but here it has helped push Russia on the defensive. It also enables prisoner of war exchanges, which are very important for Ukraine. There is presumably an impact in Russia as well, as the attack further exposed the unpopular use of conscripted troops, some of whom have been taken prisoner, undermining support for the war in Russia.

Ukraine's goals for the offensive are clear: to pressure Russia into peace negotiations; to enable Ukrainian prisoners of war to return; and to change the narrative in a direction favorable to Ukraine, in the process making an impression on Western partners of Ukraine's military capabilities. Presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak [said](#) that "[s]imple calls to Russia do not work, only a set of coercive tools works." From the military perspective, Podolyak [added](#) that the invasion involved "destruction of war infrastructure and formation of so-called sanitary zones so that Russia cannot use . . . equipment that strikes deep into the territory of Ukraine." Ukraine denied wanting to keep Russian territory, [noting](#) that "[t]he sooner

Russia agrees to restore a just peace . . . the sooner the raids by the Ukrainian defence forces into Russia will stop.”

Indeed, as President Biden noted, the invasion poses a “[real dilemma](#)” for Russian President Putin. A presumed red line has been crossed and Russian weakness away from the principal frontline exposed. While Ukraine does not intend to hold the territory permanently, it is in essence a bargaining chip. “For now, we need it,” President Zelensky [told](#) NBC News. It is also possible that holding Russian territory would make an eventual exchange of territory—to include return of territories that are legally part of Ukraine—easier as part of an eventual settlement. That having been said, Russia is also continuing some advances, though at smaller rates and great cost, in eastern Ukraine, [particularly](#) around Pokrovsk.

Other Military Developments

In the second half of the summer, Ukraine also received its first shipment of F-16s from NATO partners. Despite the [loss](#) of one plane and pilot in combat, the planes are having an impact on the war. With them, Ukraine is able to improve its air defenses, deepening its layered air defense, and to [intercept](#) Russian missiles over Ukrainian territory. Accordingly, the presence of the F-16s in Ukraine is a threat to Russian strategy, even if they are used for purely defensive purposes, as it reduces Russia’s advantage in missile attacks. Some NATO countries, such as Denmark, want to expand the use of F-16s to permit Ukraine to strike targets inside Russia, but the US will not agree to this, risking expansion of the war.

While the summer fighting season continues, in the background to the discussion is the coming [winter](#). Russian attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure, including at least [five](#) attacks on Kyiv during August, leave it with little time to prepare before the cold of winter. Ukraine is therefore responding to these attacks by [attacking](#) Russian energy infrastructure with drones, including one oil depot 1500 kilometers inside Russia, perhaps in an effort to resume negotiations for a partial ceasefire on energy infrastructure as winter approaches.

Ukraine has also reportedly [produced](#) a ballistic missile as well as a new type of drone but needs additional funding to produce drones at full domestic capacity. The Czech Republic, which has taken a forward-looking stance on the war, [announced](#) that it will use interest on frozen Russian assets to purchase large-caliber ammunition for Ukraine—the first instance of proceeds of frozen Russian assets (currently in an EU fund) being used for military aid.

Further Targeting Inside Russia?

The invasion also raises the question of how far Ukraine and its allies are willing to go in attacks on Russia. Currently, Western partners have imposed restrictions on the use of long-range weapons (not just F-16s) to hit targets in Russia (fear of escalation helped delay the provision of longer-range weapons to Ukraine). Russia has responded to previous Ukrainian attacks in border regions such as Belgorod by moving key military assets further away from the border.

Ukraine believes strongly that it should be given the ability to attack where necessary, hitting military and militarily important targets such as oil depots with Western weapons rather than only with Ukrainian weapons. President Zelensky [believes](#) that the invasion of Kursk exposed “the whole naïve, illusory concept of so-called red lines regarding Russia”; Ukraine [reportedly](#) presented a list of potential targets to the Administration but still faces opposition to the more extensive use of US weapons inside Russia, fearing escalation.

There is an active debate among NATO and EU countries about the restrictions. Several, including Denmark, want them lifted, particularly with regard to the use of long-range missiles given Russia’s use of similar weapons to attack Ukrainian civilian targets. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell [stated](#) that

weaponry provided to Ukraine has to have full use, and the restrictions have to be lifted in order for the Ukrainians to be able to target the places where Russia is bombing them. Otherwise, the weaponry is useless.” Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski [argues](#) that countries “should let Ukraine fight with whatever it has”; Sikorski also supports direct seizure of frozen Russian assets instead of the current policy of using the proceeds as a loan to procure military aid. For its part, Ukraine [contends](#) that “removing restrictions . . . will help us end the war as quickly as possible in a just manner for Ukraine and the entire world.” The counterargument remains the risk of escalation of the war.

Ukrainian Cabinet Reshuffle

On September 4, President Zelensky began a major [reshuffle](#) of the Ukrainian Cabinet. Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba as well as Minister for Strategic Industries Oleksandr Kamyshin and Deputy Prime Minister Olha Stefanishyna (who has led Ukraine’s negotiations on EU accession) all resigned. President Zelensky [justified](#) the move by saying that the government needs “new energy”; “[t]he autumn will be extremely important for Ukraine. And our state institutions must be set up so that Ukraine achieves all the results that we need.” Kuleba, who served for four years as Foreign Minister and who has broad support among Western leaders, may receive a new post in the government. From Zelensky’s perspective, it is likely better to have conducted this reshuffle after the successful invasion of Kursk rather than appearing to do so from a position of weakness.

Prospects for Peace?

Ukrainian adviser Podolyak [described](#) how in the action in Kursk “the military tool is objectively used to convince the Russian Federation to enter into a fair negotiation process.” While Russia has said that it will not enter into peace negotiations while Ukraine occupies Russian territory—and the invasion reportedly [scuttled](#) discussions for a partial ceasefire on targeting energy infrastructure—the reality is more complex.

In August, Chinese leader Xi Jinping [visited](#) both Russia and Belarus. While China’s position has not formally changed, a prolonged war also arguably does not serve Chinese interests. In addition, given its support for Russia, Ukraine does not want China to act as a mediator but rather simply to pressure Russia to end the war: “[t]he more influence a country has, the greater should be its pressure on Russia.” China could also be concerned about possible expansion of US and Western secondary sanctions. China recently [prohibited](#) export of unregulated civilian drones (which could be used for military purposes) and adopted export control provisions on drone technologies including infrared and laser technology and inertial measurement technology—a response to criticism for exports of drones to Russia.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also [visited](#) both Russia and Ukraine. In Kyiv, Modi said he is “personally” ready “as a friend” to work for peace, adding that “[t]he road to resolution can only be found through dialogue and diplomacy. And we should move in that direction without wasting any time. Both sides should sit together to find a way out of this crisis.” Modi has served as something of a restraint on Putin in the past, not least during the nuclear crisis in the summer of 2022, and if there were to be serious negotiations, India could easily play an important role in mediation with strong connections to both sides.

Zelensky also [agreed](#) that Russia should be invited to the next peace summit, after the summit in Switzerland in early summer did not yield strong results: “[t]he majority of the world today says that Russia must be represented at the [next] summit Since the whole world wants them to be at the table, we cannot be against it.”

Conclusion

Ukraine's invasion of Russia carries risks, but so does the alternative: Ukraine did not want a second summer with no advance or successful counteroffensive. Last summer, Ukraine's inability to launch a successful counteroffensive (despite Western weapons arriving late) negatively impacted Western views of the war, including among some in the US Congress, and Ukraine simply could not afford a repetition of that narrative that might have pressured it to enter into negotiations on unfavorable terms. Now, to some degree at least, Ukraine has gained an advantage, it can argue that it has shown military success in an important and unexpected way, and the invasion raises the possibility of changing attitudes in both Ukraine and Russia—and among major countries in the Global South, who will be important in any peace efforts—to move slightly in the direction of encouraging serious discussions on the war. Peace remains quite distant, but Ukraine's bold move has thus far paid off successfully as the “important” autumn for Ukraine begins.

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