

## A New Russian Offensive for 2023?



By [Dr. John Bruni](#)  
Founder & CEO  
SAGE International  
Host of the [STRATEGIKON](#) &  
[The Focus](#) Podcasts

**S**atellite imagery seems to be confirming that the Russian Army, flush with its partial success around the Ukrainian town of [Bakhmut](#), capturing the town of [Soledar](#), is planning a much larger military offensive against the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) along the [Svatove-Kreminna line](#) in Luhansk. [Countervailing analysis](#) has it that Russia is fortifying its position in Ukraine, while conducting minor skirmishes in order to distract Ukrainian defenders while utilising drone, artillery and missile strikes against Ukrainian civilian population centres and infrastructure.

Timing is everything in war, and the timing is right for a Russian offensive.

The ground is still hard enough to move armour and heavy artillery, though to what degree Russia will be fielding its best equipment for maximum effect in any new offensive is questionable. There is an argument, and a rational one at that, that the Russians, suckered into a protracted conventional proxy war



in Ukraine against NATO following Moscow's initial failed offensive against Kyiv in February 2022, has kept its best military equipment in reserve for either:

- a) Assisting Russian internal security forces to crush dissent should the Russian people tire of Putin's war and rise up against his regime (unlikely, but possible).
- b) That the proxy war between NATO and Russia heats up into something more direct (unlikely, but still possible under current conditions).
- c) Preventing its best equipment from falling into enemy hands (highly likely).

The partial mobilisation that Putin launched in September has netted some manpower gains for the Russian Army,<sup>1</sup> and it is to be remembered that it doesn't matter how badly the Russian Special Military Operation (SMO) against Ukraine has fared thus far, Russia still commands a numerical majority in men and equipment over Ukraine. Logic therefore dictates that if run well, the Russian Army could still break through Ukrainian lines and issue a significant defeat on the AFU. What such a defeat would do to Zelensky, his public stoicism and the morale of the Ukrainian people can only be speculated. Too much blood and treasure has been spent by Ukrainian defenders to give up to Russia easily, even if the entire country were over-run by the Russians. A collapse in Ukrainian resolve, however, would alter the nature of Western support for Zelensky with the West deeply embittered and unhappy about a Russian victory, but possibly absorbing it as the price for regaining stability in Europe. But so far, this possibility seems a distant prospect.

If we see things from the Russian perspective, as any good Western commander would do, one has to take initial Russian incompetence into account as well as all Russian efforts at evolving better tactical and operational responses to Ukrainian battlefield successes. Some Western commentators have suggested that the Russians are fighting as incompetently now as they did when they first crossed the Ukrainian border, though that analysis is among the less generous and filled with a pro-Ukrainian bias. Others are taking a far more nuanced approach to how Russian High Command, purged of some of its less competent operators, are now utilising fortifications, have improved its logistics tail and overall field tactics. They might be of limited scope now, but these improvements could become cumulative over time.

Conflicting Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) estimates on Russian moves aside, that the AFU is absorbing staggering losses against continual Russian artillery 'hammer blows' is something many agree on. However, Putin rolling the dice on one major push in the hope of breaking Ukraine will have to be so perfectly executed, so well timed that Kyiv will have no time to formulate a proper counter. And critically for Zelensky, that the current goodwill he's



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received up to now in terms of Western weapons deliveries, inclusive of the receipt of the Leopard 2 main battle tanks (MBTs) from Germany<sup>2</sup> and U.S. Army Abrams M1A2s, remains rock-steady.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless the lag-time in MBT deliveries for Ukraine will give Putin a window of opportunity. For Putin, he needs a major strategic victory over Ukraine in order to shore up his domestic support base and keep more extreme nationalists in Moscow at bay. If he can deliver such a victory to the Russian people, they can be beguiled into thinking that the brilliant Putin, the master genius who delivered Crimea back into the arms of 'Mother Russia' in 2014 is back. Russians, uneasy about the direction this Special Military Operation has taken, will be decisively quietened and or at least publicly chastened. Hypothetically 'the Putin as hero' narrative would likely continue the Russian leader's ability to retain power for years to come, forever being remembered as the man who took on NATO and won. And for those of you reading this, I am speculating here on the propaganda fodder that the pro-Putin people in the Kremlin will feed state media.

If, on the other hand, the gamble of a major Russian military offensive fails to crack the Ukrainian egg by the northern spring, the Ukrainians will have a chance to redouble its own manpower mobilisation and training regime, possibly preparing a major counter-offensive against Russian-occupied Ukraine by the late northern spring/early northern summer, avoiding fighting during the [Rasputitsa Season](#) where the ground turns to mush making the movement of heavy military vehicles of all type difficult. A Russian Army failure in any new offensive will buy Zelensky time to see in the introduction of new heavy armour into Ukrainian Army formations, Challenger 2s from the UK, Leopard 2s from Germany and multiple European countries and M1A2 Abrams from the U.S. And it's not the tanks alone that may change the nature of the war decisively in Ukraine's favour, but the network-centric characteristics built into these vehicles that the AFU's generous supplies of former Soviet and current-spec Russian tanks and armoured vehicles lack.

So, any new offensive being planned by the Russians has to be shocking and decisive. So shocking in fact that Western countries backing Ukraine will ease off military supplies or cut them off completely leading to a flurry of diplomatic activity for a ceasefire. Much has been said of the Russian Army's ability to carry this sort of attack out following on from its farcical initial invasion suggesting that Russia has already lost too many soldiers and too much equipment to be incautious or cavalier about preparing a new offensive. But opportunities to turn a war around, once momentum is lost, do not present themselves often. This appears to be one of those opportunities, and speculation over a new Russian offensive has been around since [December 2022](#).

What would shock the West into dropping their support for Ukraine? The introduction of WMDs onto the battlefield. What sort of WMDs? Something



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with a short duration 'linger effect' and yet a large-scale strategic effect if used in sufficient quantities. The Russians have plenty of such weapons in store from radiological to chemical. Such an attack would have to be devastating, not piecemeal. And arguably, they'd have to be 'deniable'. For instance, that the Russian state did not explicitly authorise their use, but instead, some private organisation went rogue in their patriotic duty to Russia.

Such an organisation with close links to the Russian state exist in the form of the Wagner Group.

Light radiological and chemical weapons could slip from the control of the Russian military to Wagner Group operatives to do the Kremlin's dirty work. What Ukraine's or the West's general response would be to a non-state actor's use of WMDs is anyone's guess. This scenario might have been war-gamed out behind the closed doors of the Pentagon or in NATO HQ in Brussels. Either way, it'd be a devilishly difficult thing to pre-empt or to counter.

But whatever happens in the following days or weeks ahead, something wicked this way comes. The city of Kherson, liberated from Russian forces last November, has recently come under artillery and missile attack by Russian forces on the other side of the Dnipro River.<sup>4</sup> This could be a taste of the anticipated 2023 Russian offensive, or a ruse designed to keep Ukraine off-guard while the Russians dig-in to extensive defensive fortifications.

For Russia to come out of its SMO in relatively good order,<sup>5</sup> Putin will need to cower Ukraine into submission, and or break the country in two – decisively. It has a limited time to achieve this before new Western military capabilities find their way into Ukrainian Army ranks, and when that happens, we cannot dismiss the idea of the beginning of a series of Ukrainian victories toward the end of 2023 and with all of the negative consequences this will have for the current Russian leadership.





**Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of  
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<sup>1</sup> With between [260-700,000](#) military aged men having fled Russia to escape Putin's mobilisation order.

<sup>2</sup> Not due to enter service with the Ukrainian Army for at least 3-6 months.

<sup>3</sup> Possibly entering service in around 12 months, owing to the vehicle's complexity.

<sup>4</sup> For more information: <https://www.voanews.com/a/ukraine-says-russian-missiles-target-kherson/6894577.html>

<sup>5</sup> This is a completely subjective term and is subject to the whim of commanders and soldiers fighting the battle

