

**JUNE 2023**

# THE ROLE OF WESTERN TRAINING AND EQUIPMENT IN UKRAINE'S COUNTER-OFFENSIVE STRATEGY



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## Abstract

A military probing attack is defined as an operation whose aim is to test the strengths and weaknesses of an enemy defence line. It is often used interchangeably with the term “reconnaissance-in-force”, but it differs from the latter as it focuses on the development of a complete intelligence picture (CBN, 2023). Possibly, the most recent example of probing attacks at the time of writing (2023, June 26th) is currently being carried out in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. As of now, Ukraine seems to have initiated a much-anticipated counteroffensive, which seems to be concentrated in the Zaporizhian region. Something that has caught many analysts’ interest is the scale of the Ukrainian military force used so far. In fact, it is believed that Ukraine is still holding back a large part of its military assets. Therefore, it has been hypothesised that Ukraine is performing probing attacks, although it is hard to confirm due to the requested operational silence (CBN, 2023). This paper seeks to outline the current Ukrainian counteroffensive strategies and understand the role Western efforts have played and might play in the future. By Western efforts, this paper considers the supply of weapons, technology and training of soldiers and officials. This will be done first by outlining the ongoing operation in Ukraine and the evidence that supports the hypothesis of probing attacks, then by reporting on the role of Western technology and training in relation to the earlier outlined strategy. It is important to notice that the information provided in this document has been collected from sources already available to the Russian military, meaning that this article is not breaking Ukraine’s requested operational silence.

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## Ukraine's Strategy

An important aspect of this counteroffensive has been the operational silence requested by Ukrainian forces. This, of course, has made the analysis and data-gathering processes on this attack much harder and uncertain. But what seems to be clear is that the main target of the counteroffensive has been Zaporizhzhia, together with Luhansk and Donetsk (EU Reporter, 2023). In fact, Bakhmut has been a very significant win for Ukrainian forces in Donetsk. Ukrainian troops have been advancing in the south of the city, forcing Russian soldiers to retreat (Martinez, 2023). However, analysts have suggested that the area of Zaporizhzhia is of most importance to Ukraine. More specifically, a possible win in Tokmak would lead to the most obvious strategic advantage (Pietralunga, 2023). This is because the railway passing through this city is currently one of Russia's most important transportation means to Crimea (Pietralunga, 2023). This also explains why Russia seems to have concentrated fortifications in this region. Satellite imagery suggests that most of this region's border is protected by double or triple defensive lines, which include trenches, shelters, anti-tank obstacles, and minefields (Hodges, 2023).

The evidence supporting the argument that Ukraine has not yet started its main offensive action is supported by the number of tanks and infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) currently present on the fighting grounds. It is estimated that, through Western support, a Ukrainian infantry or tank battalion comprises around 31 tanks (Lawrence, 2023). A Ukrainian brigade is expected to have three tank battalions and around two infantry battalions. In total, then, an armoured brigade is going to have 250-plus armoured vehicles of different types (Balmforth, 2023). This means that the total number of tanks has increased from a bit under 900 to about 1400 through Western supplies (Lawrence, 2023). However, an attack with this amount of infantry has not yet been recorded, suggesting that Ukraine is holding back most of its forces (CBN, 2023). It's also important to note that this situation has been ongoing for almost two weeks, and the advances seem to be slowing down. This could also mean that Ukraine's command is re-evaluating its strategy to attack Russian logistics rather than gaining territory (Goncharova, 2023).

## Western Training and Equipment

Although it has been hard to gather precise information about the equipment and technology that is being used in this counteroffensive, images have shown that German Leopard 2 and American Bradleys were used and damaged in the past days of fighting (Martinez, 2023). These tanks had been given to the 47th, 33rd, and 21st mechanised brigades, which are also among the brigades that received training from Western forces (Balmforth, 2023). This might indicate that Western equipment has already been used in the attack; however, when considering the scale of Western efforts in Ukraine, analysts have argued that Western-trained brigades and assault units will be deployed in a later stage of the attack (CBN, 2023).

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In fact, nine out of the new twelve brigades, as identified in the Discord leaks in May, had been trained and equipped by Western and NATO forces (Reuters, 2023). This leaked document also identified that the brigades that had received support were the 47th, 33rd, 21st, 32nd, 37th, 118th, 117th, and 82nd (Hodges, 2023). These facts were also confirmed by NATO's Secretary General Stoltenberg. At the end of April, he announced that the promised combat vehicles had almost all been delivered. This means that by May, Ukraine had gained over 1,550 armoured vehicles, 230 tanks, vast amounts of ammunition, and more (Reuters, 2023). Additionally, the nine brigades that had received this equipment were trained throughout winter in close collaboration with NATO. In January 2023, some of these training operations were carried out in Germany. The aim of this operation was to train Ukrainian forces to "better move and coordinate their company- and battalion-size units in battle, using combined artillery, armour and ground forces" (NPR, 2023). This also leads to believe that most Western equipment and trained officials are expected to be used in the future, serving as the main push to regain Ukrainian territory. However, analysts and Western politicians have expressed some concern regarding the pace of the attack, comparing it to earlier victories like the ones in Kharkiv (Walker, 2023). President Volodymyr Zelensky has explained that the current pace of the attack is due to the heavily mined terrain and the standing superiority of the Russian air forces. This can indicate that Western forces are likely to support and develop Ukraine's air power (by sending more F-16 fighter jets) and decrease the current focus on land forces (ECFR, 2022).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive in the conflict has raised speculation about the use of probing attacks. While the operational silence requested by Ukrainian forces has made it challenging to gather concrete evidence, we can still identify the early role of Western support and the possible role it might play in the future. German Leopard 2 tanks and American Bradley vehicles have been observed and damaged during the recent fighting, indicating their use in the conflict. However, analysts believe that the deployment of Western-trained brigades and assault units will likely occur in a later stage of the attack, as this initial stage likely aimed to test the weaknesses of the Russian defence lines. It is therefore expected that Western equipment and trained personnel will play a crucial role in future operations to regain Ukrainian territory, especially in the event of the West sending more fighter jets. Concerns have been raised by both analysts and Western politicians regarding the pace of the counteroffensive, comparing it to earlier victories like those in Kharkiv.

This counters the argument that the attack's strategy is to initiate with probing attacks and then seek to gain more terrain after a re-evaluation of the enemy's weaknesses. It would therefore mean that Ukraine is facing more challenges than expected. The evolving situation necessitates continued monitoring and analysis to fully comprehend the strategies employed by Ukraine and the impact of Western efforts.

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