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What Has Ukraine Achieved in the Kursk Offensive?

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A man repairs his apartment in a building damaged by Ukrainian strikes in Kursk. **Tatyana Makeyeva/ AFP**

In August 2024, Ukraine launched a military offensive in the Kursk Oblast. Preliminary results indicate that Russia is now being forced to adjust its plans for future offensives. Overall, Ukraine's operation in Kursk has achieved several significant objectives.

First and foremost, it was an asymmetrical response to Russia's attempts to force Ukraine into a war of attrition, exhausting Kyiv's forces and resources. Given Russia's superiority in artillery, ammunition, aviation, armored vehicles and manpower, allowing it to exert pressure along the entire front line, Ukraine has no choice but to wage a non-linear war against a superior enemy. Moreover, this asymmetry has manifested not only in strategy but also on the battlefield itself.

The operation in the Kursk region is reminiscent of the 2022 Kharkiv operation, led by the

current Commander-in-Chief, Oleksandr Syrskyi, surprising the enemy and maneuvering quickly to gain territory.

We can already say that transferring hostilities to the Russian Federation's territory has at least justified itself in operational and tactical terms. In particular, it has eliminated the threat posed by the ground forces in Russia's Sudzhansky district to the Ukrainian cities of Sumy, Kharkiv and Chernihiv. This is one of the key objectives of the offensive and effectively prevented Moscow's plans to occupy Ukraine's Sumy region.

Additionally, Russian logistics along the entire northern border were disrupted as Ukrainian forces took control of the railroad and main highways. This means that future stockpiling in the Sudzha area is now impossible, and other logistics along the border have also been impaired.

The suddenness of the Ukrainian operation made it possible to achieve another goal that is sensitive to the Russian authorities — the issue of prisoners of war. The Ukrainian Armed Forces managed to capture more than 600 Russian soldiers, including conscripts, unlocking Russia's will to propose a prisoner swap for the first time since the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

In particular, Moscow took the initiative in proposing a prisoner swap. Since the beginning of the operation in the Kursk region, four exchanges have already taken place resulting in Ukraine securing the return of 362 prisoners, including soldiers of the former Azov regiment for the first time in a while. Many of the prisoners returned to Russia were conscripts, whose involvement in the fighting has been the source of domestic controversy.

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Perhaps the most significant achievement is that with this maneuver, Kyiv is imposing its initiative on the Russians. Moscow has been forced to react on unfavorable terms, deploying additional forces to a new foothold.

The Russians tried to cope with the breakthrough of the Joint Force Operation by the forces of their North group, which controlled the area from Kharkiv to Sumy and Chernihiv regions, without particularly affecting other units. However, they had to bring in reinforcements. According to Syrskyi, the Russian command has redeployed 50,000 personnel — including assault brigades withdrawn from the Kharkiv direction, Kherson region, Chasiv Yar and even Kaliningrad — to Kursk. Due to the high maneuverability of the Ukrainian Defense Forces and well-designed tactics, even the 10 times superior Russian reserves were unable to achieve more than modest gains.

The Kursk operation also exposed significant gaps in Russia's defense. In particular, the size of Russian territory, which supposedly works to Moscow's advantage, turned out to be a weakness.

On Sept. 11, Russia launched a counteroffensive to drive Ukrainian forces out of the Kursk region by October 2 — a task they failed to achieve. Therefore, the Russian army resorted to

the habitual tactic of relying on their aerial superiority. Ukraine's Armed Forces report that Russia is conducting massive airstrikes, often leveling its own villages and cities in the process. According to Kyiv's General Staff, on Oct. 17 alone, Russian aircraft carried out 31 airstrikes using 58 guided bombs in the Kursk region

In general, the operation in the Kursk region was a wake-up call for the Kremlin, demonstrating that the Russian army is unable to amass the resources to defend its borders. Abandoning the idea of stopping the war of aggression against Ukraine, Moscow must now pay much more attention to the entire Ukrainian-Russian border.

The operation in the Kursk region has also sent a powerful signal to allies and those who still believe in Russia's invincibility. Every day that Ukrainian forces are in the Kursk region is proof that all the statements about the Kremlin's red lines are meaningless.

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