

Russia launches offensive on Kharkov as NATO threatens escalation in Ukraine

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Since the end of last week, Russian army units have attacked southwards into Ukraine, seizing areas north of Kharkov, Ukraine's second-largest city. It is now evident that this is a significant offensive, threatening to unravel the Ukrainian army's entire front line and spell disaster for the NATO puppet regime in Kiev.

The escalation in Ukraine also intensifies the danger of a reckless military escalation by the NATO powers against Russia. Indeed, what is emerging in Ukraine is precisely the situation in which major NATO powers have said they might attack Russia.

Earlier this month, French President Emmanuel Macron told *The Economist* that if the Ukrainian front lines collapsed, he might send French troops to Ukraine. Last week, there were unconfirmed reports that French troops had already deployed to Ukraine. This weekend, as the desperate situation of the Ukrainian army and its NATO backers became evident, Macron went on X/Twitter to call on the NATO powers to be "ready to act."

The Russian offensive north of Kharkov involves around 50,000 soldiers of the newly-formed Sever ("North") Group of Forces. The Russian Ministry of Defense's Telegram channel says these troops took nine villages north of Kharkov, destroyed Ukrainian tanks, artillery and air defense systems, and killed hundreds of Ukrainian troops. On Sunday, they reached Vovchansk and other towns linked to a line of Ukrainian fortifications north of Kharkov.

Ukrainian officials acknowledged suffering important setbacks. "This week, the situation in the Kharkiv region has significantly worsened," General Oleksandr Syrskii, the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian armed forces, wrote on Sunday on Telegram. Admitting to "partial successes" of the Russian troops, he said: "Ukrainian defence forces are doing everything they can to hold defensive lines and positions."

The Ukrainian army is currently diverting forces from

elsewhere along the front to reinforce units defending the northern approaches of Kharkov.

As of this writing, the precise aims of the Russian offensive on Kharkov remain unclear. In March, Russian President Vladimir Putin called to secure a "buffer zone" north of Kharkov, after Ukrainian forces launched attacks from this area on the nearby Russian city of Belgorod. Yesterday, there were at least four dead and dozens of people wounded when Ukrainian missiles hit Belgorod.

It is evident, however, that the Kharkov offensive is part of a broader Russian offensive all along the front. Some press outlets speculate that, if reinforced with more troops, the Sever Group could take both Kharkov and the nearby city of Sumy. Others suggest that this is a diversionary attack, aiming to draw off Ukrainian troops from other places on the front, which will then be stretched so thin that the Russian army will break through there.

Indeed, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Sunday: "Ukrainian defence forces are doing everything they can to hold defensive lines and positions. ... The idea behind the attacks in the Kharkiv region is to stretch our forces and undermine the moral and motivational basis of the Ukrainians' ability to defend themselves."

Drawing Ukrainian soldiers away to fight in Kharkov is already undermining the Kiev regime's operations. Last night, Military Summary, a YouTube channel that follows the war based on combat reports and video and satellite imagery, reported that planned Ukrainian attacks from Kherson, on Ukraine's Black Sea coast, had been called off after troops were diverted from Kherson to Kharkov. It also reported that Russian troops entered the strategic towns of Chasiv Yar and Krasnohorivka, after their defenses were weakened to reinforce Kharkov.

If Russian forces take these two cities, which control high ground and critical transport links, they might take

the entire Donbas region—which, since the 2014 NATO-backed coup in Kiev, has been split between areas controlled by Kiev and areas controlled by forces allied to Moscow.

Whatever the precise unfolding of the fighting, the Kiev regime faces a military catastrophe flowing from its reactionary, pro-imperialist politics. It was installed by a NATO coup and is led by figures hailing the memory of Ukrainian Nazi-collaborationist Stepan Bandera. Headed by Zelensky, who has suspended elections and rules as a CIA-backed dictator, it turned over the Ukrainian people to the NATO powers to be used as cannon fodder to fight Russia, scrapping a peace treaty it negotiated with Russia at the outset of the war in 2022.

Two years later, over a half-million Ukrainians have died, and millions of Ukrainians have fled the country to avoid brutal press gangs that draft civilians into the army. Now, as Ukrainian troops buckle under the Russian offensive, reports are beginning to emerge in the NATO countries that refer to the horrific price in lives paid by the Ukrainian people.

Discussing the Kharkov offensive, CNN admitted that the Ukrainian army has been bled white: “The cross-border attack is yet another example of what’s going wrong for the Ukrainians this year. Their forces are thinly stretched, with much less artillery than the Russians, grossly inadequate air defenses and above all a lack of soldiers.”

“Manpower shortages compel Ukraine to avoid deploying large units along the border continuously,” one Ukrainian officer told CNN. He said he expected further Russian advances, with “Russian forces deploying more units to penetrate additional border areas or to reinforce initial successes.”

The greatest danger emerging is that, faced with the failure of their strategy of fighting Russia to the last Ukrainian, the NATO imperialist powers will escalate the war, sending their own troops. This faces overwhelming opposition in the working class. Indeed, polls have shown that 68 percent of French people, 80 percent of Germans and 90 percent of Poles oppose sending troops to Ukraine.

Nonetheless, trampling popular opposition underfoot, the NATO powers are threatening to intervene, particularly if the Kiev regime keeps going from defeat to defeat, accepting the risk of escalation to nuclear war.

A week ago, on CBS, US House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries hailed the Ukraine war as a “strategic success,” but then warned that US troops might have to fight Russia directly if Washington’s Ukrainian puppet

regime collapses. He said: “We can’t let Ukraine fall because if it does, then there’s a significant likelihood that America will have to get into the conflict—not simply with our money, but with our servicewomen and our servicemen.”

On Saturday, Germany’s *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reviewed discussions in German government circles of Macron’s call to send troops to Ukraine. It concluded that in Berlin, “experts” believe “any future cease-fire line would have to be guaranteed by Western ‘boots on the ground’” in Ukraine.

On May 8, Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė told the *Financial Times* that she wants to send troops to Ukraine. Blithely shrugging off questions about nuclear war, Šimonytė said: “If we just thought about the Russian response, then we could not send anything. Every second week you hear that somebody will be nuked.”

Russia’s post-Soviet capitalist regime is, for its part, threatening that it may retaliate against NATO involvement by attacking NATO countries, including with nuclear weapons. In his May 9 inaugural address, Putin said: “Russia will do everything not to allow a global conflict, but at the same time, we will not let anyone threaten us. Our strategic forces are always at combat readiness.”

Russian General Yuri Netkachev told the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*: “If the presence of NATO specialists and soldiers at military facilities and in formations of the Ukrainian Armed Forces operating against the Russian Armed Forces is proven, they will become participants in the conflict. And in this case, the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons against them will be completely justified.”

These remarks underline that the only way to prevent a catastrophic escalation of the conflict is to alert, unify and mobilize the international working class in struggle against the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine, and against all the capitalist governments that are waging it.



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