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## **THE KURSK ‘OFFENSIVE’, THE WAR OF MANOEUVRE, & MANAGED ‘ESCALATION’: AN ANALYSIS**

**Abstract:** *This paper poses the central theme for researchers: What can military practitioners and strategic studies scholars learn about this military operation? The underlying strategic and political factors behind the (a) decision to launch the military operation? (b) in what way has the Ukrainian Armed Forces carried this out so far? However, two further factors need to be considered: (c) how this impacts the changing nature of the conflict, and (d) how the Russian Federation, and particularly President Putin’s leadership, responded. There has also been much debate about the concept of ‘managed escalation’, and the case study of the Kursk Offensive is one of ‘escalation’, within the context of the wider conflict. Did the Ukrainian Kursk Offensive, along with deep strikes, achieve the objectives of the Ukrainian Armed Forces? It is a testament to Ukraine’s military intelligence that this operation was carried out in the first place, in addition to how this has coincided with a calculated campaign of ‘deep surgical strikes’ of Ukrainian Drones into the Russian Federation, serving not just a strategic but also, a psychological imperative.*

**Keywords:** *Kursk, offensive, drones, escalation, Russia, Zelensky, strategy, military objectives, attritional, ICBM*

### **The Kursk offensive: a shift towards manoeuvre warfare**

The Kursk 2024 spearhead on the 6<sup>th</sup> August 2024 was a significant moment in the conflict and one which had taken Moscow by surprise. The Ukrainians’ use of elite mechanized forces, along with forward-deployed paratroopers and

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air-assault units, meant that it was serious about this offensive. Traditionally, this war has been fought using attritional tactics, as I previously wrote in an article: “In operational terms, the Russian military in Ukraine has pursued a ‘defence-in-depth’ strategy that included fortifications and anti-tank mines”<sup>2</sup>. The use of ‘Blitzkrieg’ tactics, by flanking and encircling the Russian forces in the Kursk oblast demonstrated the superior nature of Ukraine’s warfighting capabilities. However, the question posed is what is Ukraine’s underlying military and political strategy concerning this offensive? Initially, it can be argued that Ukraine has pulled off a strategic and military masterstroke by launching this offensive.

Firstly, one must define what military strategy is. The standard definition can be defined as “ways” as well as ends and means (Lykke1989, 2-8)<sup>3</sup>. However, there is a wider strategic imperative at play. This is the acknowledgement by decision-makers in Kyiv that Ukraine is unable to win the brutal war of attrition, due to the numerically superior Russian forces. Therefore, the Ukrainian military leaders instead decided to take the fight to the Russian interior, and therefore regain the initiative. This offensive, also, provides ‘maximal pressure’ upon the Kremlin to react to the situation and divert resources away from other areas.

By comparing the 2024 spearhead to the failed offensive in 2023, one thing is very clear. This was very carefully coordinated and had momentum, with the use of superior forces, with a clear objective of seizing Russian territory, rather than skirmishes by pro-Ukrainian Russian Forces:

“First, it is a classical military offensive being carried out on a large scale by Ukraine’s armed forces. Previous infantry raids into Russian state territory were carried out by small and semi-regular Free Russia Legion and Russian Volunteer Corps consisting of Russian citizens fighting on Ukraine’s side. The recent land invasion into Russia, in contrast, is carried out by large and regular mechanized and combined Ukrainian troops”<sup>4</sup>.

From an operational military standpoint, an important distinction needs to be made:

“[T]he land warfare between Russia and Ukraine has, with [the] Kursk incursion, switched from a confrontation almost exclusively playing out on Ukrainian terrain to one now being fought on both countries’ legal state

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<sup>2</sup> O. Steward, *Russia’s Embrace of Attritional Warfare: “Winning By Not Losing”*, “Proceedings” 2024, Vol. 2, No. 1, *Romania and the dynamics of international security*, <[https://revista.unap.ro/index.php/XXI\\_NDC/article/view/2042](https://revista.unap.ro/index.php/XXI_NDC/article/view/2042)> (23.12.2024).

<sup>3</sup> This quote was taken from my previous article, see: O. Steward, *Russia’s Embrace...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> A. Umland, *A Turn in the Russo-Ukrainian War?*, “Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies” 2024, No. 12, <<https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/sceeus/2024-publications/a-new-turn.pdf>> (23.12.2024).

territories”<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, the report goes on to add the following: “It has already after the first days of its implementation become a source of embarrassment and distraction for the Kremlin”. The strategic rationale can be summed up by stating that the “Kursk offensive, therefore, is also an attempt to deviate Russian forces out of the positional warfare and bring the war to Russia”<sup>6</sup>.

Consequently, this has become less of a war of attrition, and more of a war of manoeuvre, and during the initial phase of the incursion led to the following observation by the author: “Kyiv’s redirection of its defensive warfare onto Russian soil will have pragmatic as well as strategic and not only operational or tactical meaning”<sup>7</sup>. This is evidently seen in “With the Ukrainian troops’ relatively deep incursion into Western Russia, the war has become less of an attrition” and instead one of ‘manoeuvre’<sup>8</sup>. That being said, there is also a wider geo-strategic imperative. Therefore, in terms of the escalation, the political imperative of such a military operation can be seen in the following logic. The “Kursk operation appears to have been designed, in part, to destroy Western fears about the dangers of nuclear escalation”<sup>9</sup>. Russia has been attacked on its own territory and it hasn’t used nuclear weapons. But Zelensky [has not] been able to translate the battlefield gain into changing Western leaders’ mind”<sup>10</sup>. That changed in the coming months ahead, following the 2024 U.S. Presidential election. Therefore, it can be argued, that a changing political imperative, rather than solely a strategic imperative, was informing the Biden administration’s thinking on the issue.

In addition, during his trip to the United Nations, on September 22<sup>nd</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup>, Ukrainian President Zelensky said to the United States, to present to President Biden his ‘Victory Plan’. Therefore, one can conclude that at least from a political messaging standpoint, Zelensky is attempting to reframe the lack of battlefield momentum and inject a new narrative. Interestingly, Patrick Sullivan, writing for *The Modern War Institute at WestPoint*, argues the following:

“For the Ukrainians, the incursion is a proverbial shot in the arm that can undo some of their own war fatigue and bolster them to face whatever remains

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> L. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Kursk Offensive*, “International Politik Quarterly” 2024, No. 4, <<https://ip-quarterly.com/en/meanings-ukraines-kursk-offensive>> (23.12.2024).

<sup>7</sup> A. Umland, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> L. Johnson, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

in the current fighting season, as well as another winter without reliable electricity”<sup>11</sup>.

The perspective in terms of the optics of the offensive for the Russians is as follows:

“[T]he incursion penetrates Putin’s tightly controlled and highly curated narrative about the war. The war being brought to Russian doorsteps - beyond the missile and drone attacks that Ukraine prosecuted earlier this year in the Belgorod region – changes the stakes of the war, invites new contemplations on its possible outcome, and weakens Putin’s image as the capable political leader and strong military commander Russians need to ensure their security”<sup>12</sup>.

The following two Figures, (Fig. 1.1.) and (Fig. 1.2.) respectively, will demonstrate the changing nature of the battlefield. First, following the initial offensive with the incursion into the Kursk region and, also, the following Russian counterattacks later this year and how it contrasts.

Firstly, despite Ukraine making significant progress initially, the Russians have been able to mount a counter-offensive to reclaim parts of its territory. Later on, this year, we can see in (Fig 1.2.) that the Ukrainians are still able to control a sizeable part of its original controlled areas and will likely adopt a ‘defence-in-depth’ approach, as the Ukrainian Armed Forces fortify its positions, and dig in trench networks and other defensive perimeter while the Russians make incremental gains.

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<sup>11</sup> P. Sullivan, *Wedge and Hedge: The Political Logic of Ukraine’s Border Incursion*, The Modern War Institute 14<sup>th</sup> August 2024, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/wedge-and-hedge-the-political-logic-of-ukraines-border-incursion/> (23.12.2024).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

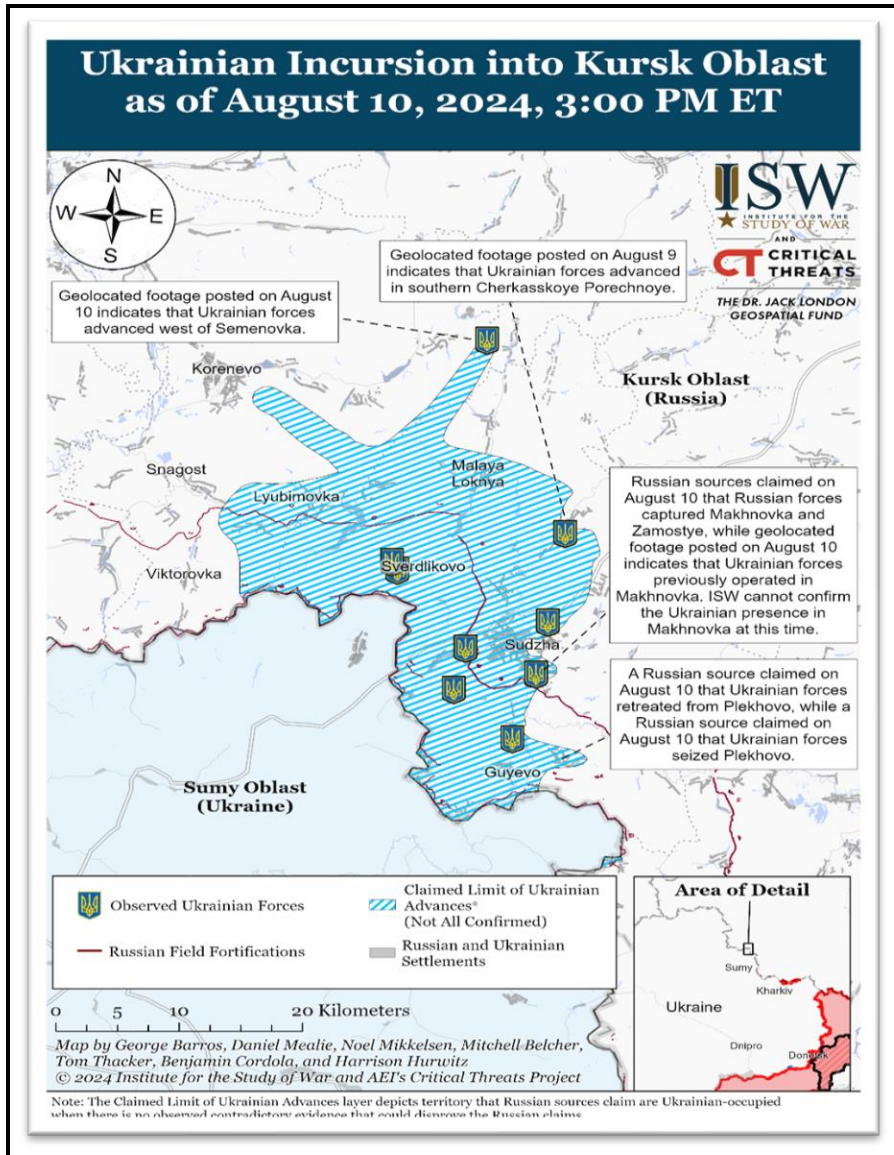


Fig. 1.1. Battlefield Map of the Kursk Offensive 10<sup>th</sup> August 2024, 3pm Eastern Standard Time<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Institute for the Study of War, *Ukrainian Incursion into Kursk Oblast as of August 10 2024*, “ISW & Critical Threats Project” 2024, <<https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/UAF%20Kursk%20Incursion%20August%2010%2C%202024.png>> (23.12.2024).

It is also interesting to note that the *Institute for the Study of War* has stated that the “first North Korean forces likely officially engaged in combat against Ukrainian troops” by November 6<sup>th</sup> (date of Fig. 1.2).

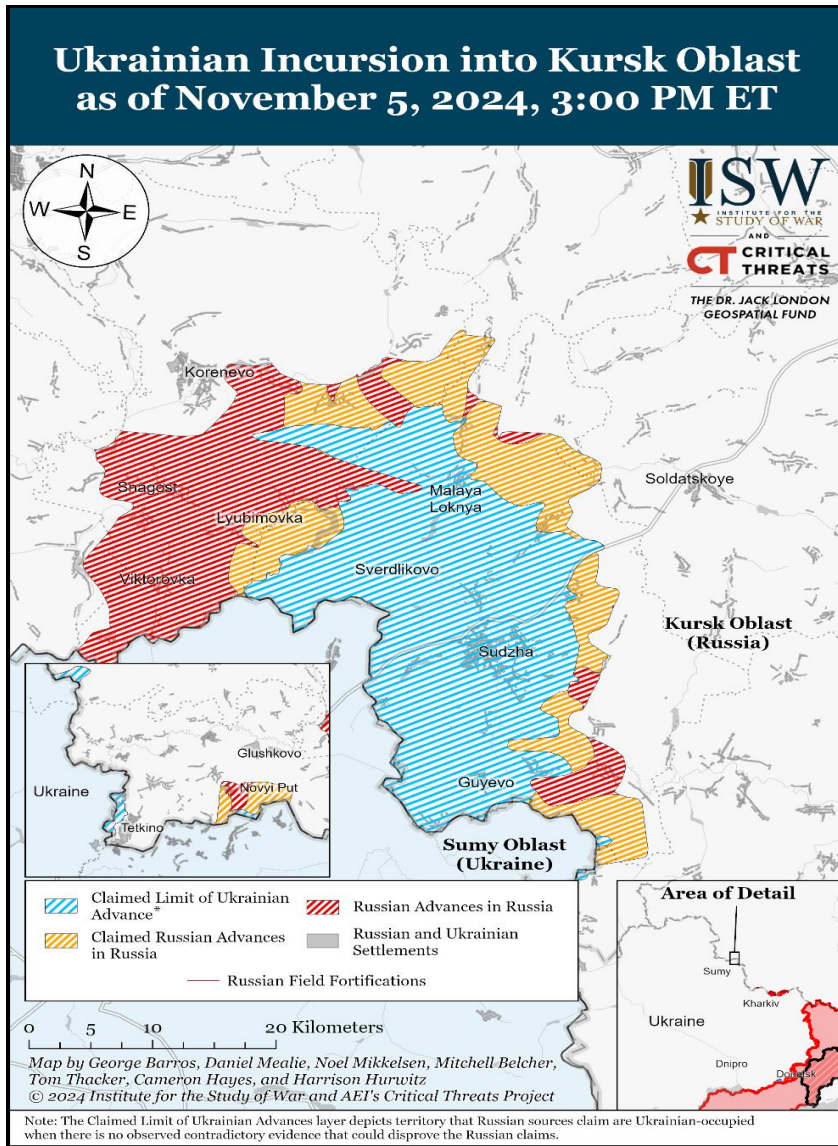


Fig. 1.2. Ukrainian Incursion into Kursk Offensive November 5<sup>th</sup> 2024, 3:00 pm Eastern Standard Time<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Institute for the Study of War, *Ukrainian Incursion into Kursk Oblast as of November 5<sup>th</sup> 2024, 3:00 pm ET*, “ISW & Critical Threats Project”, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2024,

Furthermore, it is difficult to establish who is North Korean and who is Russian, due to the North Korean troops being “disguised” as Russian soldiers. It therefore suggests that the “Russian military is trying to integrate North Korean combat power into the Russian force structure”<sup>15</sup>. This corroborates the claim that the Russians are using the North Korean troops as force multipliers to bolster their ranks. Furthermore, due to manpower shortages this will likely be expanded upon by the Russian military in an effort to maximise its firepower in the region.

Therefore, the strategy behind this military operation was clearer and more cohesive to increase Ukraine’s bargaining position, as well as inflict a military and psychological blow to the credibility of Moscow and President Putin. Consequently, Ukrainian President Zelensky and his military commanders made a strategic move to open up another front, for Ukraine to regain the initiative and be back on the military offensive, on its terms.

In the operational context, the Ukrainian ‘Blitzkrieg’ had outwitted and outmaneuvered the Russians at every turn. Furthermore, this combined with Ukrainian ‘drone’ strikes, further demonstrated the increasingly chaotic scenes in the Russian Federation itself. For example, the Ukrainian paratroopers spearheading the assault were able to effectively surround and destroy Russian units in the interior – while also working in synchronicity with other Ukrainian units on the ground and in the air. Furthermore, the Ukrainian ‘air assault’ brigades had taken the initiative by utilising Western firepower in the form of British-made, Challenger II tanks as well as American-made Bradley and Stryker vehicles, with both having superior protection for the crew. Furthermore, the superior tactics employed by the Ukrainian Armed Forces on the ground did have a further impact of shifting battlefield momentum, towards the Ukrainians at the expense of the local Russian forces – who were unorganised, outflanked, and surrounded by crack elite forward Ukrainian paratroopers, air assault, and mechanised infantry.

The Kursk offensive was Ukraine’s ‘window of opportunity’ that it had to exploit. The Kursk region provided good terrain to launch an effective offensive, and Ukrainian intelligence discerned that the Russian interior consisted of poorly trained conscripts and ‘reserve’ forces. However, it is also worth mentioning that the Kursk region has good sources of logistical transport, such as communications and rail lines. The capture of which has disrupted the

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<<https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/UAF%20Kursk%20Incursion%20November%205%2C%202024.png>> (23.12.2024).

<sup>15</sup> Institute for the Study of War, *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment*, “ISW Press”, November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024, <<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-november-5-2024>> (23.12.2024).

Russian military logistical capabilities, and that, combined with Drone strikes, has disrupted Russian military supply lines.

One of the military objectives was to relieve the Ukrainian fighting in the Donbas, by taking the war to the Russian heartland. In addition, the Ukrainian offensive has led to 100,000 Russians being evacuated or have fled<sup>16</sup>. Consequently, this has placed tremendous strain on Russian local authorities and other government agencies, who already have limited resources to deal with such eventualities. No doubt, this added confusion has further compounded the initial military difficulties of the Russians.

The Ukrainian progress in its offensive can also be attributed to the sophisticated Western military equipment given by the West enhances crew survivability<sup>17</sup>. For example, the Challenger II tank was created in the 1990s and is extremely reliable and powerful with good armour protection and a rifled 120 mm main gun with an advanced fire control system in operation<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, in the context of Ukrainian armoured warfare operations, this provides a further advantage as.

From a military operational standpoint – as of December 2024, neither Ukrainians nor the Russians are withdrawing from the Donbas front, with Russia making incremental gains in the Avdiivka region, as well as recently during the Battle of Chasiv Yar. Importantly, one of the initial military objectives of the Ukrainians was to get the Russians to pull forces away from the Donbas region. However, this has not occurred.

### **Ukraine’s ‘deep strikes’ into the Russian Federation: drones, ATACMS & Russian ICBMs**

While the Kursk Offensive became the major development in the Summer Offensive, this was further complimented by the other, asymmetrical side of Kyiv’s military machine - that of its drones. It is arguably the case, that the Ukrainian military is operating with superior military intelligence and can

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<sup>16</sup> L. Harned, *From Kursk to Kursk: Putin’s attempt to project an image as Russia’s ‘protector’ has been punctured throughout his 25 years in power*, “The Conversation”, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2024, <<https://theconversation.com/from-kursk-to-kursk-putins-attempt-to-project-an-image-as-russias-protector-has-been-punctured-throughout-his-25-years-in-power-237105>> (23.12.2024).

<sup>17</sup> *Ukrainian Challenger 2 crew reveal how British-supplied main battle tank saves lives*, “BFBS Forces News” 2024, <<https://www.forcesnews.com/ukraine/ukrainian-challenger-2-crew-reveal-how-british-supplied-main-battle-tank-saves-lives>> (23.12.2024).

<sup>18</sup> *Ukrainian Tank Crews on Pros and Cons of British Challenger 2 and Number of These Tanks still in Operation*, “Defense Express”, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2024, <[https://en.defence-ua.com/weapon\\_and\\_tech/ukrainian\\_tank\\_crew\\_on\\_pros\\_and\\_cons\\_of\\_british\\_challenger\\_2\\_and\\_number\\_of\\_these\\_tanks\\_still\\_in\\_operation-9790.html](https://en.defence-ua.com/weapon_and_tech/ukrainian_tank_crew_on_pros_and_cons_of_british_challenger_2_and_number_of_these_tanks_still_in_operation-9790.html)> (23.12.2024).



launch coordinated strikes deep behind ‘enemy lines’ in Russia, particularly at night, without any Russian countermeasures.

However, it is also worth mentioning that during the initial phase of the offensive, the West, including the United States, had still not permitted to use its long-range weaponry, including American-ATACMS and UK-French built Storm Shadows to hit targets deep inside Russia. However, it could be argued that Western strategic calculus has been based on ‘escalation management’, and not to unduly provoke the Russian Federation in making further escalatory moves, due to it being a nuclear weapons power.

Ukraine’s spearhead in Kursk, as well as what this paper terms as the ‘Drone Offensive’ against Russian munitions, airbases, and energy storage facilities, has challenged the whole notion of ‘escalation management’. Despite Russia’s nuclear rhetoric, the Ukrainian offensive has challenged this very notion, and the drone strikes have served to cause further logistical disruption as well as being of detriment to Russia’s warfighting capabilities.

Following the 2024 Presidential election, as well as the military difficulties the Ukrainians were encountering on the battlefield, combined with the uncertainty that came with the election victory of President-elect Trump’s commitment to Ukraine, provided the political and strategic impetus to lift the ‘ban’ on the usage of Western-made weaponry, so that Ukraine can strike targets inside the Russian Federation. It is important to note that authorising Ukraine to use such weaponry will strengthen its ability to wage war against a numerically superior adversary, from an operational military perspective, but it is doubtful this would fundamentally change the tactical and strategic landscape due to the sheer numerical advantages that the Russians currently have at its disposal.

While this did prompt Russia to again engage in nuclear sabre-rattling rhetoric, as well as a revision of nuclear doctrine, so far, its escalation has been, ‘managed’, pun intended. However, Russia did launch two, non-nuclear ICBMs, at Ukrainian targets. This was the first use of intercontinental ballistic missiles in a war-fighting capacity. Arguably, this served a political imperative – that of President Putin demonstrating the political will to launch such a strike upon Ukraine, and to remind the West that Russia still possesses the capability, if not the intent, to strike using the full range of its conventional, long-range capabilities. But the symbolism of using a weapon system, that is designed specifically, to carry a nuclear payload has not been lost.

**President Putin’s path dependency in the Ukraine conflict:  
massive losses on both sides & the deployment North Korean  
troops in Kursk**

A wider point has to be made as to how this offensive impacted international public opinion, but also, just as important, the credibility of Putin as the

“master strategist”. As the Russian state was now seen as weak due to its intelligence failures to firstly, (a) predict this offensive in the first place, but also, (b) the initial lacklustre and uncoordinated response by the Kremlin. However, this does bring up the issue of what strategic options Putin has moving forward. Furthermore, what can be realistically predicted?

Firstly, after the initial shock of the military operation, the Kremlin ordered its frontline units away from the Ukrainian front to defend its interior, as well as Chechen forces, known as ‘Kadyrovites’, being redeployed. However, this had a wider political imperative which meant the Russians calling this a “counter-terrorist operation” and placing the control of forces with the Secret Service and the FSB. This indeed reflected the growing nervousness of the Kremlin to both manage the perception of the unfolding of events, by calling it a ‘counter-terrorism operation’<sup>19</sup> and, shifting the burden of responsibility away from the military and, instead, towards the interior ministry.

While taking into consideration Ukraine’s ‘Kursk’ offensive, one must also consider the military constraints as well as the resource limitations of the Russian Federation, in the Summer of 2024. As I stated last year, this conflict has shifted from that of manoeuvre to a war of attrition. This has resulted in massive losses in both equipment and manpower. This has produced further constraints on strategic options moving forward.

President Putin's decision not to escalate this, but instead, shift the bureaucratic momentum from the military and towards the interior ministry, is also a testament to the Kremlin acknowledging the institutional limits that it operates. President Putin’s leadership style is one of micro-management, but also, he must also shift the burden of responsibility. As was the case in late 2022, President Putin cannot (1) initiate full-mobilization, as this would be an acknowledgement that the war is not going well, and there will likely be public resistance to such an idea. Furthermore, it will impact President Putin’s political capital. Secondly, (2) not changing the operational military response would also encourage further gains by the Ukrainian military in the Kursk region, which would have a further negative impact on Moscow’s credibility. Furthermore, the current ‘attritional’ phase of the conflict means that the Russian leadership is unable to launch a ‘surge’ of troops in the region – as it is still having to wage a brutal offensive in the Donbas. Moving considerable forces from this particular theatre of operations will cost the Russian military much-needed firepower. Therefore, a third option needs to be considered.

However, one must also take into consideration the tremendous amount of losses the Russians have encountered as a result of its ‘Special Military

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<sup>19</sup> D. Sabbagh, *As Ukraine’s Kursk incursion forges on the stakes are rising for both sides*, “The Guardian”, 15<sup>th</sup> August 2024, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/15/ukraine-kursk-incursion-russia-stakes-rising-for-both-sides>> (23.12.2024).

Operation'. The Russian military casualty figures have exceeded 600,000 troops, although it may even be the case that this figure is much higher. This was quoted by President-elect Trump in his social media post, quoted as saying "where close to 600,000 Russian soldiers lay wounded or dead in a war that should never have started, and could go on forever"<sup>20</sup>. Russia in its latest offensive in the Donbas was losing 1,500 soldiers per day due to the savage nature of the conflict. That being said, one thing to bear in mind is that Kyiv's figures are not made public, and one can at least infer that it may be comparable to that of the Russian side. That being said, what we do know is that Kyiv is also experiencing 'manpower' issues, with pressure growing to reduce the conscription age to 18, with Kyiv resisting pressure to do so<sup>21</sup>.

From a strategic and operational standpoint, the introduction of North Korean troops does demonstrate escalation and the changing dynamics of this conflict. That leads this paper to consider the North Korean 'option' as a force multiplier in an era of military constraints. Russia has become more dependent upon North Korean weaponry and firepower to wage this war of attrition. The Ukrainians by launching this offensive have changed the character of the conflict, at least in the Kursk theatre of operations, by once again waging a war of 'manoeuvre'. As the North Koreans are being sent to the frontlines, reports indicate that they have sustained hundreds of casualties, although the figure itself is hard to approximate, due to the lack of independently verified sources.

It is important to consider how well integrated these North Korean soldiers are with the Russian military. If they are not integrated at all, the Ukrainians can use this to their advantage on the battlefield. Also, in terms of this increasing 'path-dependent' relationship between Moscow, and North Korea – we will likely see further North Korean troops fill the ranks in the Kursk region, while Moscow provides technological, economic and military aid to Pyongyang. While it is not the mainstay of this paper, nonetheless one can speculate that Russia will further enhance North Korea's ballistic missile program, while the North Koreans continue to provide fresh troops and war materials to aid in Moscow's war efforts. In addition, likely, the North Korean regime will further reinforce its ranks with a further commitment of troops for a potential upcoming Russian offensive, whenever that will eventually occur.

From a military operational standpoint, the North Koreans do not have the battle experience that the Ukrainians, or for that matter, Russians have. Furthermore, there does seem to be a lack of coordination and fire support, and

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<sup>20</sup> D. Trump, @realDonaldTrump, Truth Social, Dec. 8<sup>th</sup> 2024 post, <<https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/113615912452824634>> (23.12.2024).

<sup>21</sup> W. Murray, *Ukraine War Briefing: US urges Zelenskyy to lower conscription age to 18*, "The Guardian", 28<sup>th</sup> November 2024, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/28/ukraine-war-briefing-us-pressure-on-zelenskyy-to-lower-conscription-age-to-18>> (23.12.2024).

instead, the focus is on ‘human wave’ assaults in open terrain against heavily defended Ukrainian positions. There have even been reports of friendly fire incidents with North Korean troops killing at least six Chechen soldiers. Additionally, there have also been reports of language issues, with a lack of mutually understandable linguists available. This will likely, at least in the short term, further compound the fighting ability of the fresh North Korean replacements.

### **The Biden ‘surge’ in military & financial aid: enough to turn the momentum in Ukraine’s favour?**

Following President-elect Trump’s Victory in the 2024 Presidential election, we have seen a renewed commitment by the Biden administration, limited in escalation but continuing in its longstanding commitment to Kyiv. This is seen in terms of financial aid, the agreement for Ukraine to use Western-made weapons to strike targets inside Russia itself, and a further aid package of weaponry, armoured vehicles and munitions to be given by the end of the Presidential term. While this is limited in scope, it will enable the Ukrainians to strike logistic targets, and also airfields and other munitions storage sites that will have a direct impact on the battlefield.

Allowing Ukraine to strike targets deep inside Russia is a form of ‘strategic escalation’, which has been subject to controversy and political commentary on the relative merits in addition to the risks associated with such a strategic move. On a wider geopolitical note, this has the intention, at least in the short term, to demonstrate to Moscow that, regardless of the outcome of the 2024 Presidential election, the United States remains committed to aiding Ukraine’s defense. But this also serves a wider political imperative. It locks the future administration into at least agreeing in principle to continue this policy and creates a certain ‘path-dependent logic’ in this escalation ladder. No doubt this will generate wider strategic questions for the incoming Republican administration as to how best to conclude the war, but also the efficacy of the authorisation of long-range weapons. According to *The Hill*, As President-elect Trump has posted on social media, “I don’t think that should be allowed”, and further arguing that, “Why would they do that without asking me what I thought? I wouldn’t have had them do that, I think that was a big mistake”<sup>22</sup>. While Trump has also suggested he may reverse the authorization for Ukraine to use American-made long-range weaponry, specifically the (ATACMS) long-range weapon system, it remains to be seen whether this will be carried into Presidential policymaking come

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<sup>22</sup> B. Dress, *Trump says Russia-Ukraine peace may be harder than Middle East*, “The Hill”, 16<sup>th</sup> December 2024, <<https://thehill.com/policy/defense/5042314-trump-says-russia-ukraine-peace-may-be-harder-than-middle-east/>> (23.12.2024).

January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025, onwards. It is still very much open to speculation at this stage.

## **Conclusion**

While Ukraine has seized on the military and strategic initiative, the question now is whether it has been able to follow through. The short answer is, surprisingly, no. Although it has been able to capitalise on its initial gains and adopt a more defensive position – it has not led to the complete collapse of the Russian lines. Furthermore, the Russians have been able, to a limited extent, to reinforce its position, as well as, launch strikes against Ukraine’s interior. In short, the Ukrainians have been able to seize on limited gains, but this has not turned into a decisive victory. Rather, it has turned into limited gains. In addition, Russia has sought the deployment of North Korean troops to free up Russian forces to fight in the Donbas. Therefore, it is very unlikely that Ukraine has the current manpower or current military capabilities to push back against the sustained Russian onslaught, and this will likely mean Russia will continue to make incremental gains. It is worth noting that the Ukraine war is still predominately a war of ‘attrition’, and as such, Russia still has the numerical advantages in terms of raw military firepower and manpower available, even if it is being augmented by North Korean troops in the short-to-medium term. Therefore, the use of North Korean troops as a ‘force multiplier’ will likely continue for the foreseeable future, as the relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang as beneficiaries.

Another consequence of this offensive, and another critical development, is found in the use of North Korean soldiers who for the first time since the Korean War have been deployed in combat roles, and for the very first time, been used in warfighting on the European continent – which has both a strategic as well as a symbolic value. During the time of this writing, North Koreans have sustained hundreds of casualties, and many have questioned the combat effectiveness of these soldiers. Only time will tell whether the use of North Korean soldiers will translate into any substantial military gains in Kursk, as well as potentially over theatres of operations. That being said, Ukraine’s strategic position in Kursk is likely to remain a key bargaining chip in any future political discussions as to how to end the war and will likely be leverage in any compromise with the Russian Federation.

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