

The Fight for Kherson: Ukraine's Ongoing Counteroffensive

Kherson: A Key Location

Since Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a “[special operation](#)” invasion of forces into Ukraine on February 24th, Russia has adapted its strategy: following the Russian military’s three initial axes of advance towards Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Kherson, Russian troops retrograded back. Now, Russian forces are striking offensively in the eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions, plus the southern [Black Sea](#). At least in the east and south, it appears Russian forces had garnered some success: they had managed to take Kherson, Melitopol, and Mariupol, cut off Ukraine’s access to the Sea of Azov, and secured a stretch of land from [Crimea to Donbas](#). However, Russia has also faced mounting setbacks that threaten its tenuous hold on the region. Despite Russia’s numerical superiority over Ukraine in defense spending, weapons, and soldiers, Russia has lost nearly [40,000 military personnel](#) and thousands of weapons systems. Kherson is a key location in this unfolding narrative. A valuable port city located on the Black Sea and Dnieper River and home to nearly three hundred thousand residents, [Kherson](#) was the first major urban center seized by Russian forces and is crucial in the Kremlin’s war efforts in southern Ukraine. Local officials in Kherson have warned of Russian plans to stage a referendum in the coming weeks—Moscow has installed [proxy officials](#) expected to count “sham” votes and declare a “Kherson People’s Republic.” The suspected referendum appears inevitable. However, as the looming threat of Ukraine’s counteroffensive seeks to encircle Kherson, the Russians must expect a steep challenge to retain control over the city. The forthcoming fight for Kherson will represent a turning point in this war, and all signs point to a likely Ukrainian success *if* the Ukrainians complete the following initiatives: A) Identify which Russian unit will be the main effort for the Kherson defense. B) Disrupt Russia’s supply efforts. C) Control the dam at Nova Kakhovka and determine its best use. D) Determine if the Russians will destroy Kherson’s civic infrastructure to retain the terrain. Answering these requirements will help Ukrainian troops gain tactical flexibility in their fight for Kherson.

Ukrainian Objectives

The operational objective for Ukrainian forces is to liberate Kherson from Russian occupation. Recent Ukrainian military successes suggest this objective is not only possible, but likely. Over the past few months, Ukrainian forces have made steady gains into the Kherson region as part of a growing [counteroffensive](#): Ukrainian strikes have mangled all-three Russian-controlled bridges leading into Kherson, blown-up a Russian-controlled railway in the surrounding area, and killed several Russian generals and senior officers. In particular, the destruction of the [Antonivskiy Bridge](#) near Kherson has cut off one of Russia’s vital supply lines. Russia attempted to reconstruct crucial areas of the bridge, with Ukrainian forces responding with further missile strikes. Russian forces now have little mobility across the Dnieper River, further depleting its garrison in Kherson of essential supplies. HIMARS (High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems) have proven to be game-changers for Ukraine in the conflict, and anticipated [F-16 shipments](#) from the U.S. would bolster Ukrainian power. President Zelenskyy and Kherson administrative officials feel confident, claiming Ukrainian forces will [liberate the Kherson region](#) entirely in September.

Russian Objectives

The operational objective for Russian forces is to defend Kherson from a Ukrainian counterattack and to secure the referendum, enveloping Kherson under Russian control. For Russia, maintaining hold of Kherson is critical for several reasons: 1) Strategically located at the mouth of the Dnieper River's exit into the Black Sea, Kherson provides access to [fresh water](#) that supplies much of Crimea. 2) Kherson is a steppingstone to attack Odesa and western Ukraine in the future. 3) Kherson is a vital link in the Russian military supply chains, as the city allows for heavy artillery to move through Ukraine via rail. The loss of a critical supply line on the Antonivskiy Bridge, the damage inflicted upon the Nova Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant Bridge, the staggering loss of troops, and the ever-increasing Ukrainian advance towards Kherson signals that Russia's aim to hold Kherson will be too costly and will drain resources from the main effort in the east. In terms of the referendum, Russian occupiers are struggling to convene citizens for a vote. However, the Kremlin is likely to use intimidation and fraudulent election tactics to approve the motion, a move straight from Moscow's playbook in 2014 with its [point-of-the-gun referendums](#) in Crimea.

Intelligence Requirements and Capabilities

Ukrainian forces must answer the following intelligence questions to obtain better understanding of where they can seize initiative and competitive advantage in the liberation of Kherson:

1. Which Russian unit will be the main effort for the Kherson defense?

Ukrainian forces must determine which Russian unit near Kherson will be their priority for targeting. To counter a Ukrainian offensive into Kherson, the Russian military is enhancing its presence in the city: videos on social media in mid-July showed ["an endless" military column](#) of Russian troops heading towards Kherson. However, open-source intelligence also suggests many Russian newcomers to Kherson are poorly trained conscripts arriving straight from intense fighting in the Donbas. Additionally, Russian military equipment in Kherson is archaic. Putin's forces have deployed [1960's-era T-62 tanks](#), vehicles, and rocket launchers to the fight—a symptom of Russia's shortage of effective, modern equipment. Ukraine needs to take advantage of its western-gifted weapons and target Russia's unreliable, aging hardware. Ukrainian forces must identify the most combat-effective Russian unit in Kherson and target this unit as its main effort:

- Task GEOINT to gather aerial photography via UAVs and satellites of all Russian units stationed in or around Kherson. Identify numbers of troops and weapons present. Task IMINT for high resolution images of denied areas of personnel.
- Task SIGINT to intercept communications of Russian units to determine their combat intentions and capabilities. Task SIGINT to intercept communications of Russian troops and identify units of low morale for targeting. ELINT can be tasked to intercept radar signals that confirm location, movement, and tactics of Russian units.
- Task All-Source analysts to corroborate locations of these units via OSINT. Analysts should look for indicators of increased supply of ammunition, weapons, or soldiers to certain units.
- Task HUMINT sources to infiltrate Russian-held areas in and around Kherson to scrutinize their defenses and morale levels.

2. How is Russia reinforcing its supplies in and around Kherson?

Following its success in destroying pivotal Russian crossing points across the Dnieper, the Ukrainian military must continue to locate additional Russian supply lines and depots. The goal must be to completely sever Russia's logistic lifelines into Kherson. Ukrainian forces will aim to take Kherson

quickly; this requires eliminating Russian artillery caches that could rubble the city during conflict. To determine Russia's reinforcement tactics in Kherson:

- Task GEOINT to photograph nearby supply depots. Estimate capacities of each depot and the capabilities of weapons present. Continue to monitor Russian efforts to repair missile-damaged bridges across the Dnieper.
- Task SIGINT to track geolocation data from Russian vehicles traveling to and from supply depots.

3. *How should Ukraine best utilize the dam at Nova Kakhovka?*

The [Nova Kakhovka dam](#) is the sixth and last dam in the Dnieper river cascade, providing hydroelectric power, navigation, and irrigation; the dam's lock and power station controls a capacity of 357 MW of water. Ukrainian missiles have impaired the bridge, yet Russian forces have begun renovations. There is another factor at Nova Kakhovka that should be investigated: Ukraine could utilize the dam's flow of water as a force to dislodge Russian equipment or pontoon bridges. Additionally, maintaining a steady Ukrainian presence at the dam would isolate remaining Russian forces on the west side of the Dnieper River. Liberating Nova Kakhovka would present a devastating and demoralizing reality for Russia and would turn the tide of the defense of Kherson. To identify the capabilities and best-use of the dam:

- Task GEOINT to locate Russian troops nearby Nova Kakhovka and determine movements. Task GEOINT to determine terrain composition, elevation, and other characteristics that would influence the flow of the Dnieper River and water from the dam.
- Task SIGINT to intercept nearby Russian unit communications to ascertain possible Russian plans to press more troops at the Dnieper River-Nova Kakhovka dam crossing point.
- Task All-Source analysts to search open-source resources for signs of Russian movement near and around Nova Kakhovka.

4. *Will the Russians destroy the civic infrastructure of Kherson to retain the terrain?*

Ukraine must determine whether Russia intends to employ a scorched-earth policy on Kherson or leave the city relatively intact. The answer to this intelligence requirement will shape Ukraine's combat tactics: Russia devastating Kherson gives Ukrainian forces leeway to employ more aggression. Additionally, Ukraine can continue to portray Russians as ruthless occupiers in the media. However, if Russia intends *not* to devastate Kherson, Ukrainian forces must adapt their tactics and mitigate combat aggression. To identify if Russia will devastate Kherson:

- Task SIGINT to intercept cell phone communications of Russian operators in and around Kherson, as well as communications from nearby radar towers.
- Task HUMINT to recruit sources within the occupied Kherson city council buildings and Russian military units for information regarding Russian intentions.
- Task All-Source analysts to scour open-source platforms for signs of Russian military intent; this could include media interviews with Russian military leadership, social media platforms, or local Kherson news reports. Analysts should identify Russian precedent in past conflicts to conclude the likelihood of the enemy employing scorched-earth tactics.

Conclusion

Winning Kherson would unlock a treasure chest of jewels for Ukraine: success in liberating the city would likely force Russian troops to completely retreat from the region, mitigate Russian ambitions for campaigns into Odesa and western Ukraine, and strike a humiliating political blow for Putin.

Additionally, liberating Kherson would energize Ukrainian forces to push further east and aid resistance in the Donbas.

For the Ukrainian military, the lesson is this: the fight for Kherson is not just a game of “capture the flag;” that is, to simply seize and hold terrain is the folly of modern warfare. Instead, the current Ukrainian counteroffensive has proven that dominating *logistics and supplies* first is the key to winning battles. So far, Ukraine has cut off major Russian supply routes and leveraged its cutting-edge weapons to destroy Russian ammunition stores and decrepit Soviet equipment. To liberate Kherson, Ukraine must continue denying supplies for Russian troops, while resupplying their own. This will best-position Ukrainian forces to re-take Kherson, then continue east to liberate its captured territory.