

AFTER BAKHMUT: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE LATEST PHASE IN THE UKRAINE WAR

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In December last year, while [speaking at the U.S. Congress](#), Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy compared the battle for Bakhmut to the Battle of Saratoga, in which the American revolutionaries clinched a decisive victory against the British in October 1777. "... the fight for Bakhmut will change the trajectory of our war for independence and our freedom," he said. Five months later, Bakhmut is not in Ukraine's hands. After 10 months of fighting, Russia's Ministry of Defence announced last week [the city's capture in the eastern Donetsk region](#), its first major territorial gain since January when it took neighbouring Soledar. Ukraine claims that its troops continue to defend a small area of Bakhmut and is advancing on its flanks, but has admitted that the eastern city "is effectively in Russian hands, for now". For Vladimir Putin's [Russia, which invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022](#), it was a much-needed victory after a series of setbacks late last year when Russian troops were beaten back by the Ukrainians from the Kharkiv Oblast in the northeast and Kherson city in the south. The Russians are already in control of the whole of Luhansk and getting Bakhmut would potentially allow them to target other major urban centres in Donetsk such as Kramatorsk and Sloviansk. For Ukraine, which was preparing for a major counteroffensive, the loss of Bakhmut is a setback, but not the end of the road.

Russia, whose initial thrust into Ukraine failed to meet its objectives, seems to be learning from its battlefield mistakes as its invasion has turned into a war of attrition. According to a recent report by the London-based Royal United Services Institute, Russia's battlefield tactics, coordination, supplies, electronic warfare and air defence have improved. In Bakhmut, Russia suffered huge losses but the fighting was done by Wagner, a private military corporation, which provided much of the regular Russian troops, including the 300,000 freshly mobilised soldiers, time to build fortifications along the over 1,000-km frontline and undergo training. On the other side, Ukraine was supposed to launch its counteroffensive at the beginning of Spring, and the delay points to its battlefield problems, which were partially revealed by leaked U.S. intelligence documents earlier this year. But Ukrainian troops now have some of the most advanced weapons, thanks to the West. In recent months, Ukraine has also carried out attacks inside Russia, using drones and medium-range fire or saboteurs, bringing the war home for Mr. Putin. Now, with advanced weaponry, Ukraine is betting on its counteroffensive and ability to create disruptions inside Russia. To recover from its setbacks in Soledar and Bakhmut, Ukraine will have to regain territories quickly, while Russia tries to capitalise on the momentum created by taking Bakhmut. As both sides are determined to continue the war, there is no hope for peace or talks on the horizon.

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