

# IRREVERSIBLE MOMENTUM FOR UKRAINE

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Ukraine's successful counteroffensive in

Kharkiv Oblast has changed how the world thinks about the war, according to U.S. Lieutenant General (Ret.) Ben Hodges.

Hodges, who served as commander of U.S. Army Europe from 2014-2017 and has helped train Ukrainian soldiers, said the operation ended "the mythology of Russia's inevitable victory."

"Now people around the world, in Europe and U.S., start thinking — wow, Ukraine can win," he told the Kyiv Independent.

To achieve that victory, however, Ukrainians will need to keep the pressure up and deprive Russia of the chance to regroup. That won't be easy.

"Those Ukrainian soldiers are exhausted right now, but they're not as tired as the Russians," Hodges said.

The Kyiv Independent spoke to Hodges about Ukraine's recent counteroffensive on the sidelines of the M100 Sanssouci Colloquium, an international media conference that took place in Potsdam, Germany on Sept. 15:

**The Kyiv Independent: Let's start with the news that everybody's talking about — the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast. What did you think of what Ukrainian troops achieved there? Ukrainians of course see it as a miraculously successful operation. What made it this successful?**

**Ben Hodges:** First, of course, it's too early to be planning the victory parade. There's still a lot of fighting to do. But I do believe that we have reached the point of irreversible momentum for Ukraine.

Secondly, this was not a miracle. This was the result of several things that came together. Number one, very thorough planning and preparation by Ukrainian General Staff. A very good deception plan. Disciplined performance by Ukrainian soldiers and leaders at all levels. Skillful employment of Western-provided weapons — the way that Ukrainians use them to hit ammunition and headquarters and so on, and then what we call OpSec, operational security. We knew more about what the Russians were doing than we did (about) Ukrainians, which is as it should be.

All of that was against a Russian force that did not have the will to fight. They don't want to fight, they're exhausted, and their logistics are exhausted. And so the General Staff picked the right time and place to concentrate — and so you get this result.

**The Kyiv Independent: What will be the consequences of this successful counteroffensive?**

**Ben Hodges:** Three things come to mind right away. Number one, obviously, big parts of Ukraine have been liberated, and there's a momentum they can keep going.

The second consequence is that now people around the world, not just in Ukraine, but in Europe, and the U.S., start thinking — wow, Ukraine can win. I've never doubted it. But now, I think, for more and more people, all of a sudden, the mythology of Russia's inevitable victory is gone. This is a very important consequence. And I think other nations will start saying — hey, we want to help.

The third consequence is Crimea. I think this will change how a lot of people think about Crimea now. All of a sudden, it looks achievable (to liberate Crimea). That is from Kherson and down towards Donetsk as they start approaching Crimea. Soon, they will be able to hit Russian targets in Crimea. And then when they do that every day, it's just a matter of time. I think people in Crimea are already starting to leave. They're going across that bridge, getting out of there. And I think it's a good thing that they leave that escape route for them to get out, for now.

**The Kyiv Independent: So you don't think that Ukraine should hit the Crimean Bridge?**

**Ben Hodges:** Not yet. Because I think it's useful right now. As an escape route, yes, for civilians, but also for military that want to desert, because the goal, of course, is the total restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty. And that should be the message that comes from Kyiv. Just like these little cards with a flag and then the QR code on the back, inviting them to leave. At some point, of course, after Ukraine has reestablished its sovereignty over all of its territory, to be able to use Mariupol and Berdiansk, the Sea of Azov for commerce, that bridge will have to go.

**The Kyiv Independent: And when you mentioned Ukraine's effective deception plan, did you mean Ukraine's statements about the counteroffensive in the south?**

**Ben Hodges:** It was every day in the newspapers. I remember hearing journalists talk about it, "Hey, where's this offensive, when is it going to happen?" And I had friends that were getting frustrated.

**The Kyiv Independent: Did you think that this was going to happen? That maybe the southern counteroffensive was too public to be real?**

**Ben Hodges:** It didn't match the other very careful (moves). But it was brilliant. And of course, it worked. Russians moved troops down towards Kherson. So now you've got more Russians that are trapped on the right bank of the Dnipro. And it made them very vulnerable.

**The Kyiv Independent:** You also mentioned that Russian soldiers don't want to fight. Do you think that Russia would go for general mobilization? And if so, what would it give Russia — even more people who don't want to fight?

**Ben Hodges:** I don't think they will do it. Because then the Kremlin would really have to do some fairy-tale production for it to make sense after the last six months or a year. And you hear every now and then that "Oh, this is really NATO against Russia" — that's part of the preparation. But I don't think they'll do it because it'll be a disaster. People will not show up. They can't even fill all of their units now.

And let's just say that Russia said — "No, this is so important, we're going to declare mobilization." And 100,000 people show up. They don't have equipment for them. It'd be months before they could be trained and put in where it would make a difference. Of course, they could be sent to the front immediately where most of them would be killed or would desert. But that would not change the outcome.

**The Kyiv Independent:** You've said before that you don't think Russia would use nuclear weapons. What are you basing that assumption on? We can guess Putin's intentions and the intentions of his circle, but just hoping that he's not insane enough to go for nuclear weapons seems like a very thin thread.

**Ben Hodges:** I think it's more than a thin thread. But of course, we are making an assessment of the situation. Of course, people who have real responsibility, like my president and your president, have to think about the possibility (of a nuclear weapon being used), no doubt.

But the reason that I think it's unlikely — not impossible, but unlikely — is because there's no advantage for Russian forces to do that. It won't, all of a sudden, change the conflict because they have nothing with which to exploit.

If they used it against, God forbid, Kharkiv or somewhere and killed lots of people, there's no Russian force that can then come in and go to Kyiv or whatever. So there's no advantage.

Number two, if they use it, I believe that the United States would have to become directly involved. The United States could not ignore that Russia used a nuclear weapons. Because if they did, then the North Koreans, the Chinese, the Iranians will think — we could use a nuclear weapon. That's the reason it is so unlikely, because if the U.S. did become involved, then it would be devastating for Russian forces. I'm sure that the Russians don't want to have the U.S. involved here, especially now that we see how rotten, rotten they are.

And then, of course, the third reason is that I don't believe that Putin or his circle are crazy. They're evil, but they're not crazy.

**The Kyiv Independent:** Just to clarify, when you say that the U.S. would have to become directly involved if Russia used a nuclear weapon, do you mean that it would be the right thing for them to do, or that is what they *will* do?

**Ben Hodges:** I believe that the U.S. would have to respond to the use of a nuclear weapon. That does not mean that U.S. troops are going to come to Ukraine. I don't know this, of course, but I believe that the Pentagon's duty would be to draw up a list of options for the president that would say, depending on what Russia does —

where, what type of target, was it a demonstration or did it hit a city — there would have to be a response of some sort to signal to the Chinese and the North Koreans and the Iranians that you cannot use nuclear weapons. And that's what I mean that the U.S. would have to be involved.

The response could be nuclear, but I think more likely would be a non-nuclear response inside Ukraine, most likely not inside Russia.

**The Kyiv Independent: So if it's a non-nuclear response, and it's inside Ukraine, but it's not sending troops, what could it be?**

**Ben Hodges:** You would have to send troops, meaning airpower or cruise missiles, something like that. For me, the most likely thing would be something like airstrikes against Russia's Black Sea Fleet — to wipe it out. Or to crush Russian forces that are in Crimea or other places inside Ukraine.

**The Kyiv Independent: This is a question from our senior defense reporter, Illia Ponomarenko: What conclusions about the art of war could be drawn from these events?**

**Ben Hodges:** Well, I think that people in military staff colleges and military academies are going to be studying this campaign (the counteroffensive in Kharkiv Oblast) for a long time. Because of the combination of things I talked about — the deception, the discipline, the preparation. What we have seen so far is operational art.

The way that the General Staff was able to prepare everything, constantly hitting Russian logistics, creating chaos in the rear area for the Russians. However, you guys hit that Saky Airfield — that changed everybody's mind. Like, oh, the rear areas are not secure, it's vulnerable. I think that really rattled the Kremlin. Just like these idiots at the beach, the Russians. And of course the next day, they are trying to get out of there.

**The Kyiv Independent: What would be the ideal way to end this war in the near future?**

**Ben Hodges:** The only way it can end is for Ukraine to regain total sovereignty over everything, including Crimea and Donbas, for the 1 million plus Ukrainians who were deported by Russia to be accounted for and all of them brought back. And then, the war crimes — that process will happen.

But I think that the United States will establish a much better bilateral relationship, a normal bilateral relationship with Ukraine, but with a large military cooperation component to it. I don't know exactly what that will look like. But I can imagine that there will be some sort of relationship like we have with Israel, for example.

**The Kyiv Independent: Ukraine regaining sovereignty over all territories — how can it be achieved?**

**Ben Hodges:** Well, it's through what's happening right now. Of course, it has to continue. Keep the pressure, don't let the Russians get back up. And this is very hard. Those Ukrainian soldiers are exhausted right now, but they're not as tired as the Russians who are trying to escape. So they have to keep that pressure up.

Number two, all of us have to stick together, keep providing everything we said we would provide, and keep

sanctions in place. Those sanctions are a big deal.

Kherson — eventually, this is going to be wiped out. The Russians in Kherson are going to be either killed, captured, or they're going to run away. I don't know how long (it will take).

**The Kyiv Independent: And you believe that because Ukraine has already hit a lot of infrastructure there?**

**Ben Hodges:** Yes, the bridges are gone, so they're basically trapped in. They will not fight like (the Ukrainians did) in Mariupol. So what happens? Once that's eliminated, you're approaching Crimea. And Russians are trapped. They either drive away or sit there. And then those HIMARS and other rocket launchers just start hitting airfields, Sevastopol, all the military bases every day. And I believe Crimea then becomes untenable. They can't stop it.

**The Kyiv Independent: Can we expect the fighting to quiet down during winter?**

**Ben Hodges:** I don't think so. I read this, I hear people saying it. No, I don't think that the Ukrainian General Staff wants to do that. They don't want to give the Russians not even two months or one month to get their sh\*t together. Look, these are not Floridians like me, these are Ukrainians who live there, and they know how to operate in the wintertime.

Now, I'm not the one out there, standing in a trench. But if you keep the pressure up, don't let the Russians have a chance to regroup. Don't give them a chance because if you do, then they will come back.

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*Olga Rudenko is the chief editor of the Kyiv Independent.*

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