



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on August 21, 2023

Seymour Hersh: CIA Believed Ukrainian Counteroffensive Would Fail

On August 17, American journalist Seymour Hersh claimed that the CIA had cautioned U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken that Ukraine's current counteroffensive against Russian forces would fail, and that Kyiv "will not win the war." Blinken "has figured out that the United States — that is, our ally Ukraine — will not win the war" against Russia, Hersh wrote on his Substack blog, quoting an anonymous U.S. intelligence official.

"The word was getting to him through the Agency [CIA] that the Ukrainian offense was not going to work," Hersh's source elaborated, without indicating when these notes of caution began to emerge. "It was a show by [Ukrainian President Vladimir] Zelensky and there were some in the administration who believed his bulls**t."

The Ukrainian counteroffensive began in early June this year, with Kyiv mobilizing its most stellar Western-armed and trained brigades to destroy Russia's land bridge connecting the Donbass with Crimea in the southern province of Zaporizhia. By many accounts, the counteroffensive has so far been a failure. Moreover, based on recent statistics from the Russian Defense Ministry, the operation has cost Ukraine more than 40,000 troops and almost 5,000 pieces of heavy equipment in exchange for some villages.

Hersh's source claimed that the CIA's sober assessment of Ukraine's chances led Blinken to consider brokering a peace deal to end the conflict, "as Kissinger did in Paris to end the Vietnam War." Despite knowing that Ukraine's prospects were grim, CIA Director William Burns reportedly took this opportunity to approach the White House and offer support for President Joe Biden's policy of indefinite military aid for Kyiv, with the aim of securing a higher position in the Biden administration.

Notably, Hersh is not the first reporter to posit that high-level American officials knew Ukraine's counteroffensive would be a failure. Military leaders in the United States and other NATO states were already aware that the operation would be unsuccessful as long as Ukraine did not have a means of addressing Russian air superiority, *The Wall Street Journal* reported. However, Kyiv's Western supporters permitted the operation to be launched, supposedly hoping that "Ukrainian courage and resourcefulness would carry the day."

Throughout the past two months, Zelensky has constantly attributed the failure of his military to the West, saying that he was not given sufficient weapons, especially fighter jets and long-range missiles, to break through Russian lines.



AP Images
Ukrainian soldiers at the front line



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Mirroring Hersh's remarks, U.S. intelligence agencies have also conducted a "grim" evaluation of Ukraine's current counteroffensive, thinking Kyiv will not be able to head south toward the Crimean Peninsula by the end of 2023, *The Washington Post* reported.

Officials have expressed serious reservations about Ukraine's efforts in a classified intel report, the contents of which were handed over to the *Post*, with the outlet mentioning Moscow's "brutal proficiency" in safeguarding captured territory.

"The US intelligence community assesses that Ukraine's counteroffensive will fail to reach the key southeastern city of Melitopol," the [report](#) said, adding that Kyiv would then be unable to "fulfill its principal objective of severing Russia's land bridge to Crimea in this year's push."

While the peninsula has been under Moscow's control since its residents voted to rejoin Russia in 2014, Ukrainian officials have promised to retake the region by force, insisting that it belongs to Ukraine.

According to Kyiv's blueprint to reclaim Crimea, Melitopol would supposedly play a vital role as one of the largest urban centers located near the Azov Sea coast, providing a staging area for further assaults on the peninsula itself.

At the moment, Ukraine's leadership is divided over whether to continue the operation or wait until next spring, according to a recent *Newsweek* report. The American magazine wrote that Zelensky has to determine "whether to go all-in and risk a costly failure, or to cut Ukraine's losses and accept a politically damaging defeat."

Thus, the Ukrainian leadership is now divided into two camps, with one group maintaining that Kyiv should back out temporarily until an expected Russian offensive in the fall and spring. The second group, which includes army chief Valery Zaluzhny, hopes to sustain the counteroffensive while rejecting naysayers' concerns as "impatience rooted in misunderstanding," the *Newsweek* article mentioned.

"There definitely are some differences among the Ukrainian leadership about the military strategy," an unnamed source "close to the Ukrainian government" told *Newsweek*.

Ukraine's lack of progress on the battlefield has also led to disagreements among civilian officials, with "a blame game ... brewing in Kiev," the outlet penned.

Nonetheless, a Ukrainian Defense Ministry spokesperson has dismissed allegations of a split among Ukrainian leaders, stating that they were Russian propaganda narratives in a statement to *Newsweek*.

Kyiv officials have acknowledged the difficulties in their counteroffensive against Moscow. In recent weeks, numerous Western media outlets have reported that Kyiv's backers were unimpressed or outright "alarmed" by its slow progress on the battlefield.

On Saturday, the *Times* reported that NATO had been overly optimistic about Ukraine's push, partially owing to "miracles" promised to the bloc by Kyiv officials.

In an interview with French news outlet *Le Figaro* last week, former French president Nicolas Sarkozy criticized the current European military approach to handling the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Rather, he insisted that diplomacy was the only solution to solve the conflict, and that Ukraine should be a neutral country to function as a bridge between Russia and the EU.

Sarkozy, 68, was interviewed by the French outlet about his upcoming memoir *The Time of Battles* covering the 2009-11 period of his 2007-12 presidency. "We need the Russians and they need us," the outlet titled his [interview](#).



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Referring to the Ukraine situation, Sarkozy stated that Russian President Vladimir Putin was wrong to “invade” the country and has failed to attain his goals. However, Sarkozy said that Putin was “not irrational” and should be approached via diplomatic means.

“Russia is a neighbor of Europe and will remain so,” Sarkozy said, so the EU needs to get out of the present deadlock as “in this regard, European interests are not aligned with American interests. We cannot stick to the strange idea of ‘fighting a war without fighting.’”

From Sarkozy’s viewpoint, a compromise would entail the West acknowledging Crimea as Russian, as “when it comes to this territory, which was Russian until 1954 and where a majority of the population has always felt Russian, I think any step back is illusory.” Ideally, he continued, there should be a referendum “organized under strict control of the international community” to address the present state of affairs.

The same would apply to “disputed territories of eastern and southern Ukraine,” the former French leader added, though that would be contingent upon what happens on the ground.

“If the Ukrainians do not completely manage to win them back, then the choice will be between a frozen conflict — which we know will inevitably lead tomorrow to a new hot conflict — or we can come out on top by resorting, again, to referendums strictly supervised by the international community to settle these territorial questions in a definitive way,” he told *Le Figaro*.

Besides, Ukraine “must remain” a bridge between Europe and Russia, Sarkozy stated, highlighting that compelling it to select between the East and the West “seems to me contrary to the history and geography of this complex region.”

“We are making false promises that will not be kept,” he said of the notion of Kyiv’s membership in the EU and NATO, not just because Ukraine does not fulfill the requirements but because “it must remain a neutral country.”

This neutrality would not be an “insult” and would be ensured by “extremely strong security assurances” from the West, Sarkozy qualified.

Moscow has maintained that Kyiv’s neutrality is a non-negotiable Russian national interest. The Ukrainian government has tried to lobby for NATO and EU membership ever since the U.S.-backed coup in 2014, which provoked the Donbass uprising as well as the referendum in Crimea to rejoin Russia.

Sarkozy’s successor, François Hollande, helped facilitate the Minsk agreements supposedly meant to peacefully address the Donbass conflict. Nonetheless, Hollande and former German Chancellor Angela Merkel acknowledged last year that the Minsk process had been a ruse to give Ukraine more time to prepare for war with Russia.

“Since 2014, Ukraine has strengthened its military posture. Indeed, the Ukrainian army was completely different from that of 2014. It was better trained and equipped. It is the merit of the Minsk agreements to have given the Ukrainian army this opportunity,” Hollande said, stating that it halted the advance of Donbass “separatists” in Mariupol.

Meanwhile NATO Chief of Staff Stian Jenssen landed in hot water on August 15 when he suggested that Ukraine should give up parts of the occupied territories in exchange for NATO membership and an end to the conflict.

In exchange for reasonably speedy NATO membership as well as preventing a long-drawn conflict,



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Jenssen said that Ukraine should contemplate ceding territory.

The front lines are unlikely to considerably change in the short term, he suggested, which must be considered when talking about peace. “Russia is struggling tremendously militarily, and it seems unrealistic that they can take on new territories,” Jenssen said, adding, “it is rather a question of what Ukraine is able to take back.”

Jenssen also revealed that talks about Ukraine’s post-war status are already ongoing and that the possibility of ceding land has been broached by others as well.

Nonetheless, Jenssen knew he might have overstepped a diplomatic boundary with his public suggestion, and was quick to emphasize it was not NATO’s official stance: “I’m not saying it has to be that way. But that may be a possible solution.”

Ukrainian officials were incensed at his proposal.

“Trading territory for a NATO umbrella? It’s ridiculous,” [commented](#) Mykhailo Podolyak, one of President Zelensky’s chief advisors, on Twitter. Podolyak went on:

That means deliberately choosing the defeat of democracy, encouraging a global criminal, preserving the Russian regime, destroying international law, and passing the war on to other generations. If Putin does not suffer a crushing defeat, the political regime in Russia does not change, and war criminals are not punished, the war will definitely return.

Oleg Nikolenko, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry’s spokesman, lambasted Jenssen’s remarks as “absolutely unacceptable.” Nikolenko explained, “The conscious or unconscious participation of NATO officials in shaping the narrative regarding the possibility of Ukraine’s giving up its territories plays into the hands of Russia.”

For its part, Russia seemed to welcome Jenssen’s idea.

Ukraine ceding the disputed territories “does sound like an interesting idea,” [wrote](#) Dmitry Medvedev, a former president and the deputy head of the Russian Security Council, on Telegram.

“The only problem is that all their alleged territories are highly disputed. So, in order to enter [NATO], they would have to give up Kiev itself, the capital of ancient Rus. And the capital would thus have to be moved to Lviv. That is if the Poles agree to leave Lemberg for the coke and lard lovers.”

On its end, NATO reiterated its undying support for Ukraine, with its spokesman [stating](#), “We fully support Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, as NATO leaders reaffirmed at the Vilnius Summit in July. We will continue to support Ukraine as long as necessary, and we are committed to achieving a just and lasting peace.”



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