

Analysis of Moscow's SMO and the Ukraine War Theatre: Interview with Ret. Colonel Karapandžin

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InfoBRICS interviewed [many reputable military experts](#) regarding the direction in which [the special military operation \(SMO\) is headed](#) and how it's been going so far. These pundits have not only [shown profound understanding of military processes](#) in the NATO-orchestrated Ukrainian conflict, but have also [predicted important events with shocking precision](#). Continuing this tradition, we have had the honor of interviewing Stevica S. Karapandžin, a Colonel (ret.) of the Serbian Armed Forces.

While in active service, Colonel Karapandžin served as an artillery division commander and Head of the Department of Operational and Educational Affairs in the command of the Artillery Brigade. At the General Staff of the Serbian Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defense (MoD), he performed operational tasks, as well as those in the field of media and public relations, serving as the Director of the "Defense" media center ("Одбрана" in Serbian). Colonel Karapandžin is a member of the Journalists' Association of Serbia, as well as a regular author in many reputable media. He has published a large number of scientific and professional works, texts and books, including one about the Russian SMO in Ukraine, [named "The Geopolitical Gambit – Special Military Operation"](#) (currently available in Serbian only).

Despite his busy schedule, Colonel Karapandžin graciously accepted to conduct a written interview about the SMO for InfoBRICS. According to his assessment, after several turning points, the course of the SMO is heading toward its culmination, so the achievement of proclaimed Russian goals – the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine – is becoming more certain.

The Introduction to the General Dynamics of the SMO

Colonel Karapandžin argues that the determination of the Ukrainian side is the decisive defense of the Donbass, organized in three operational zones.

The first zone was running along the Severodonetsk – Lisichansk – Popasnaya line, the second and longest was Seversk – Soledar – Bakhmut – Konstantinovka – Avdeyevka – Maryinka – Ugledar (or what the Colonel calls the Donbass Arc), while the third and shortest line is Slavyansk – Kramatorsk – Druzhkovka. The first was taken in June 2022, while the second was breached in January 2023 and is currently the main focus of combat operations. Russian forces are most likely gravitating toward the city of Slavyansk and the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine can be accomplished by surrounding and destroying the Ukrainian combat potential in the third zone.

In line with the assessed operational planning, the achieved results and the duration, Colonel Karapandžin divided the current course of the SMO into stages and each stage into phases. Every stage was marked by one or two Russian offensives on smaller cities and a large number of open-field offensive battles and combat operations. The ratio of attacker-defender forces was generally out of the ordinary, usually 1:1 [offensive operations are normally conducted with an advantage of at least 3:1]. During the second stage, the Ukrainian side carried out offensive operations in the Kharkov area, while in the fourth it focused on the Zaporozhye direction. There were no offensive operations on a strategic level.

Drago Bosnic (DB): What was the true goal of Russian forces moving on Kiev in the initial stages of the SMO?

Image: Car belonging to Donbass Insider after it was destroyed by Ukrainian artillery shelling in the district of Petrovski, in the west of Donetsk city on 4 June 2022. Picture source: Donbass Insider



Ret. Col. Stevica S. Karapandžin (RCSSK): By analyzing intelligence data on Ukrainian plans for an offensive operation in the Donbass in early 2022, the Russian General Staff determined that the opposing side underestimated the strength of the forces in Crimea and this observation was implemented through the strategic employment [of these forces]. In order to divert the enemy's attention, Russian forces were significantly increased along the border with Belarus, and in the period from February 10 to 20, these forces were pre-deployed there, carrying out massive training activities under the name "Allied Resolve" ("Объединенная Решимость" in Russian). To the Ukrainian side, this created a false impression of a plan for an offensive operation toward Kiev.

In reality, the plan existed only as a distraction and Ukrainian forces were urgently transferred from the Donbass in order to tie up Russian troops and prevent the fall of the capital city. The Russian side had the opposite intention – tying up the strongest Ukrainian forces in the defense of the cities of Kiev and Kharkov – in order to expose the areas in the south, which was successful. The first, shortest stage of the SMO – which was preparatory – was marked by a two-pronged Russian strategic surprise offensive, with exploitation at the operational and tactical level through continuous initiative. With the stretching and tying down of Ukrainian forces on a 3,000 km wide frontline, also involving a large number of tactical airborne assaults, high-precision missile strikes, a distraction operation around Kiev and the urgent capture of Mariupol, the Russian military's focus was gradually shifted to the Donbass – from the military point of view, the key area of this war.

DB: Why was Mariupol so significant for Russia?

RCSSK: The original idea for the Russian offensive operation in Mariupol was to circumvent the Kalmius industrial district and direct its main forces toward the western and central parts of the city, isolating Ukrainian defenses in the industrial area. As the frontline moved to the north, Ukrainian forces were cut off from coastal areas and forced to abandon the defense of Kalmius, resulting in the gradual decline of their room for maneuver. Thus, Ukrainian troops were forced to defend their positions in the “Azovstal” steel plant, which ended with their encirclement and surrender.

In order to neutralize the Ukrainian group of about 8,000 fighters and enable the land connection between Crimea and the Donbass, the Russian side took its time to finish mop-up operations in Mariupol, and after more than a month of blockade, smaller Russian forces were still tied down by around 2,000 Ukrainian defenders. On April 21, assault operations were paused and “Azovstal” was blocked in order to allow the majority of Russian forces to advance further in the Donbass. The epilogue was the surrender of the remaining parts of the 36th Separate Marine Brigade and the “Azov” Regiment on May 20, 2022. The second stage of the SMO and Russian offensive operations in the Donbass began on April 19, 2022.

DB: How would you describe the strategic impact of the capture of Severodonetsk?

RCSSK: In the spring of 2022, in the first phase of the second stage of the SMO, Russian forces achieved a large number of successes in the Krasny Liman and Lugansk operational directions. Breakthroughs were carried on tactical routes Izyum – Barvenkovo, Izyum – Dolina, Krasny Liman – Yampol, Stara Krasnyanka – Privolye, Aleksandrovka – Severodonetsk and Popasnaya – Verkhnyokayanka. Near the town of Privolye, they managed to cross the Seversky Donets River, formed a bridgehead on the southern bank, brought in fresh forces and, having taken control of Belogorovka, extended their operations toward Lisichansk. In May, they captured Rubezhnoye, and in June, Lisichansk and Severodonetsk, which was a success of operational significance.

After the capture of the first operational zone of the Ukrainian defense, which brought the Lugansk region under Russian control, a further advance was expected in order to break through the northern part of the second operational zone (Seversk – Soledar – Bakhmut) and the Slavyansk – Kramatorsk line. However, for the first, and for now, the only time, the Ukrainian side decided to defend Lisichansk and resorted to desperate defense, further strengthening the Seversk – Soledar – Bakhmut line. Because of this, as well as the Ukrainian operational success in the Kharkov direction in September 2022, the expected Russian offensive didn't occur, just as Seversk wasn't taken (apart from the battles fought in the nearby settlements of Serebryanka and Verkhnekamensko).

DB: What can You tell us about the capture of Soledar?

RCSSK: In the first half of 2023, the third stage of SMO commenced. With the “Wagner” PMC's capture of Soledar in January 2023, the second operational zone of the Ukrainian defense was breached, which was a Russian tactical success with certain aspects of operational importance. This compromised the previously compact Ukrainian defenses in the Donbass, with the possibility of Russian forces circumventing Seversk from the south and Bakhmut from the north and placing these two areas in operational encirclement. The road-railway communication of the Ukrainian second operational zone was cut, placing it under Russian artillery fire control. With the success of its assault squads, the “Wagner” PMC tied up considerable enemy forces in Soledar, which forced the Ukrainian General Staff

to strengthen the defenses by engaging units planned for operations in other directions. Then, for the first time, the Russian side applied the strategy of “sucking” Ukrainian reserves into the meatgrinder.

DB: Can You tell us more about the Battle of Bakhmut (now known as Artyomovsk)?

RCSSK: Bakhmut, which was in the operational encirclement for a long time, was also captured by units of the “Wagner” PMC in May 2023. Then, for the first time, the Russian side used the tactic of intentionally leaving one area as a “supply artery” of the enemy’s defenses, while continuously observing and keeping it under artillery fire control. In addition to having a negative impact on morale, particularly in terms of encouraging uncontrollable withdrawal, Ukrainian forces also suffered significantly greater losses in large open areas. The offensive operation to capture Bakhmut began on October 8, 2022. In line with the basic principles of defense, the width of a battalion’s coverage area should be 3-5 km, but the Ukrainian side’s in Bakhmut was no more than 1.5 km. The political leadership of Ukraine refused to give up, so the Russian side continued with the strategy of “sucking” Ukrainian reserves into the meatgrinder.

Russian offensive tactics included the most massive type of artillery strikes, the so-called “wave of fire”, with constant pressure from assault groups on selected tactical directions. By skillful choice of the center of operational gravity, but also by constant changes in the direction of attack, the Russian side kept creating a favorable balance of forces. This also implied great losses for the attackers and huge consumption of artillery munitions, which was measured in train cars. In street battles, rocket launchers with thermobaric munitions (man-portable MRO “Borodach”, a more advanced version of the RPO “Shmel”, and TOS-1A “Solntsepyok”), UMPK-equipped precision-guided FAB glide bombs and 240 mm 2S4 “Tyulpan” mortars were used en masse.

DB: What was the strategic impact of the Battle of Avdeyevka?

Image: Residential building in Avdiivka (Donetsk Oblast of Ukraine) after Russian rocket strike on 23 May 2023



RCSSK: In the second half of 2023, in the fourth stage of the SMO, the Ukrainian side suffered a failure of its offensive in the Zaporozhye operational direction. Naturally, the second phase of this stage soon followed, which was marked by a crawling Ukrainian attack and active Russian defense. Until it was lost, Avdeyevka was one of the few remaining

sectors of the southern part of the Donbass Arc, the most important and most fortified Ukrainian defense position in the Donbass agglomeration. For a decade, Ukrainian forces used this area as a stronghold for artillery strikes on Donetsk, Gorlovka and Yasinovataya. Along with Peski, Russian forces previously took a number of settlements in the area (Stepovoye, Bogdanovka, Pervomayskoye, Veseloye, Opitnoye, Lastochkina, Severne, etc.) and the city was already in an operational encirclement for quite some time. Avdeyevka's elongated shape, with a position perpendicular to the frontline, meant that the best way to capture it was a wide two-pronged assault, which is exactly what the Russian side did.

Once again, due to a political decision to defend the Donbass, Ukrainian reserves intended for other directions were "sucked" into the meatgrinder. An important moment for the Russian side was the capture of the Terrikon Hill. The advancing forces even dug tunnels under the positions of the defenders so that the attack was carried out from below, along with the demolition of Ukrainian fortifications. The offensive tactics that gave results in Bakhmut was reused – the city was in an operational encirclement, while a narrow "supply artery" to the west was left. Although General Syrsky started his appointment as the Chief of the General Staff with the strengthening of the forces in Avdeyevka, by sending, among others, the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade (including parts of the "Azov"), he soon decided to abandon the city. The withdrawal of Ukrainian units at the end of February 2024 indicated a difficult situation on the entire front. It remained unclear whether the decision to leave Avdeyevka was taken by the military leadership or if it was a consequence of an uncontrollable abandonment of defense positions.

DB: What is the current distribution of forces on both sides?

RCSSK: Russian forces in the third and fourth stages of the SMO were grouped into five strategic-operational groupings, and a sixth was recently formed. The focus of operations is Donetsk, where the "Center" group is advancing, and partly in the South Donetsk operational direction, where the "East" group is conducting offensive operations. The "South" group is advancing in the direction of Bakhmut, while the "West" group is focused on the Krasny Liman and Kupyansk operational directions. Defensive operations in Kherson and limited offensive operations in the Zaporozhye operational directions are carried out by the "Dnieper" group, while in order to stretch Ukrainian forces, the "North" group is advancing in the Kharkov operational direction. The Ukrainian forces, divided into five strategic-operational groups, are on the defense in all parts of the frontline. "Tavria" is tasked with Zaporozhye, South Donetsk and Donetsk, "Khortytsia" in Bakhmut, Krasny Liman and Kupyansk, "Odessa" in Kherson, "North" in the Kharkov operational direction, while the "Marun" group is in the reserve. The ratio of opposing forces is 1:1, albeit slightly higher in favor of the Ukrainian side.

DB: Where exactly is the center of combat operations shifting?

RCSSK: After the capture of Avdeyevka, Pervomayskoye and Maryinka, the Russian side gained room for initiative and advance to the west, which will put the Ukrainian defense in an increasingly difficult operational position, especially if communication on the Konstantinovka – Pokrovsk – Kurakhovo line is cut. In this way, along with the capture of Seversk and Ugledar as the two endpoints of the Donbass Arc, Ukrainian defenses would be broken. Thus, with the fall of Avdeyevka, the fifth stage of the SMO began, the essence of which is to crush the second Ukrainian defense zone, or more precisely, to capture its southern part. Thus, the focus of Russian offensive operations is on the Donetsk direction, which is implied by three indicators: the current great importance of Konstantinovka, the

concentration of three Russian strategic-operational groups in a relatively small area and the character of Russian combat operations allegorically named the “Ocheretino Flower”. In this direction, the Russian group “Center” neutralized and captured more Ukrainian resistance points than all the other groups combined (Ocheretino, Berdychi, Novokalinovo, Novobakmutovka, Netaylovo, Arkhangelsko, Orlovka, Solovyevo, Sokol, Keramik...), which can also be seen in the importance of capturing Avdeyevka.

The impression of “blooming” occurs due to alternating deep advances to the west and the securing of the captured wider lines. Due to the regular rotation of forces, other echelons are introduced and continue with the advance, with coordinated actions in the capture of important communications and the threat of trapping Ukrainian troops in cauldrons, which forces them to give up their defensive positions and withdraw in disarray. Attention should also be given to the importance of cooperation between the Russian “Center” group and neighboring groups. If the “South” group occupies Chasov Yar, its southern branch will play an important role in encircling the Ukrainian group in Toretsk, as well as in circumventing Konstantinovka. In addition to all that, the capture of Chasov Yar can have an extremely important psychological impact, because Kramatorsk, where the command post of the Ukrainian group defending the Donbass is located, is only about 40 km away from it. Cooperation with the “East” group in combat operations toward Ugledar and Kurakhovo is also important, which explains the purpose of Russian offensive operations toward Krasnogorovka.

DB: What additional operational directions could be activated?

RCSSK: The “East” group is also intensifying operations toward Velika Novoselka and Staromayorskoye in order to threaten the Dnepropetrovsk – Pavlograd – Pokrovsk route, a kind of “supply artery” of the Donbass Arc’s defenses. The Russian “Dnieper” group will most likely undertake limited offensive operations in the Zaporozhye direction in order to push parts of the Ukrainian “Tavria” group away from the so-called Surovikin line. Until October 2022, in the northern part of the frontline, the Russian side defended the zone on the line Kazachya Lopan – Lyptsi – Veseloye – Ternovaya – Staritsa, but after the Ukrainian offensive, those forces were withdrawn. Currently, smaller parts of the Russian “North” group are carrying out offensive operations in the general Belgorod – Kharkov direction, with the goal of soon reaching the aforementioned line, which is why the Ukrainian “North” group has been significantly strengthened by the urgent transfer of forces from other directions. There are ongoing battles for the town of Volchansk, while the goal of the Russian offensive is to stretch out Ukrainian forces. The Russian “West” group is intensifying operations toward Kupyansk and Seversk, where parts of the Ukrainian “Khortytsia” group are still defending successfully. The role of the Russian “West” group could be to capture Kupyansk, Yampol, Izyum and Seversk at the best moment (which is increasingly likely due to the accelerated wearing down of Ukrainian combat potential in the Donbass) and thus create the conditions for the introduction of the main forces of the Russian “North” group, most likely in the direction Belgorod – Kupyansk – Slavyansk.

DB: What do You think could happen in the following weeks and months?

RCSSK: The task of the main forces of the Russian “North” group could be to wedge into the rear of the Ukrainian forces defending the third defense zone, while the previous elimination of the Donbass Arc is one of the most important steps in the preparation of the Russian strategic offensive to destroy the Ukrainian operational potential in the Donbass – from the military aspect, the key to ending this war. On an operational level, as I said already, the

next place the Russians will press is Velika Novoselka, in the south. The forces in the southern direction around Chasov Yar, Ocheretino and Novobahmutovka will encircle Toretsk. But that's not the main line of attack and serves more as a form of psychological pressure. It's very difficult to break through in this area.

That's why the Russian forces will circumvent it and when they cut the Konstantinovka – Pokrovsk direction, the Ukrainian front will begin to disintegrate. They will encircle Slavyansk and Kramatorsk so that the main forces from the north will wedge through Kupyansk toward Slavyansk. When Russian forces close the cauldron, the war is effectively over. But first they must capture Kupyansk, Izyum, Seversk, Ugledar and Kurakhovo. Combat operations near Kharkov are aimed at stretching Ukrainian defenses when the time comes for a strategic wedge and the blockade of Kharkov from the east. This is precisely why only auxiliary forces operate in the north. There are around 150,000 troops in the reserve near Belgorod and Kursk, still waiting to commit to any direction.

DB: Thank You for this truly fascinating analysis!

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