

Strategic importance of Kherson region for the Russo-Ukrainian war

By the end of September 2022, the Russian Federation had annexed five Ukrainian regions: Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. The Kherson region was annexed, along with the city of Kherson, which serves as the region's center; this is the only regional center that the Russian army has managed to seize since February 24, when Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine began. The military resistance was minimal, and the region was quickly occupied for reasons that are still unclear.

However, the Russian occupation authorities have recently ordered the evacuation of the civilian population, and the headquarters has been relocated from Kherson to Skadovsk. At the beginning of November 2022, Russia announced a decision to withdraw its forces from the right-bank part of the Kherson region in order to allegedly save the lives of the military and release troops for further offensives in other areas.

Sergei Surovikin, the commander of the so-called special military operation, stated that Russia was retreating in response to an alleged threat of flooding from Ukraine by releasing water from nearby reservoirs or shelling the huge Nova Kakhovka dam, which still remains under Russian control. Ukraine, in turn, accuses Russia of being intent on blowing up the Kakhovka dam and subsequently blaming official Kyiv for being responsible for the possible damage.

After Russian troops retreated from Kherson on November 11, the Ukrainian army entered the city and began stabilization measures in Kherson areas and other de-occupied settlements in the region.



Source: New York Times

Various media stress the importance of liberating a part of the Kherson region and Kherson itself because of their strategic importance in **Ukraine's campaign to regain territory in the south of the country**. For example, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters on Saturday during a trip with US President Joe Biden to Cambodia that the withdrawal of Russian troops had "broader strategic implications".

The strategic importance of Kherson lies primarily in its **geographical location**.

Kherson region is located in the southern part of Ukraine, in the basin of the lower reaches of the Dniipro River within the Black Sea lowland, washed by the Black and Azov Seas.

Kherson region borders the Zaporizhzhia region in the east, the Mykolayiv region in the north-west, the Dnipropetrovsk region in the north, and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea along Syvash and the Isthmus of Perekop in the south. Kherson has the oldest seaport on the Ukrainian Black Sea coast. The first warships of the Russian Black Sea Fleet were built here. Since Soviet times Kherson has specialized in the construction of civilian cargo ships, including tankers.



Kherson region is strategically important due to its **proximity to annexed Crimea and the vital Black Sea**. Furthermore, the only land connection to Crimea runs through the Kherson region. It serves as the entry point to the peninsula, which Russia annexed in 2014. During the Russian invasion, this gate remained mostly open. There were no bridges blown up to halt the march. As a result, large Russian formations advanced hundreds of kilometers north from Crimea.

The North Crimean Canal, which begins in Nova Kakhovka, about 80 kilometers east of Kherson, and ends in Kerch, Crimea, was Russia's most important target.

Due to water scarcity, the peninsula has been supplied with fresh water from the Dnipro River via this canal since Soviet times. The North Crimean Canal **supplied 85% of Crimea's freshwater** needs until 2014. When Russia occupied Crimea in March 2014, Ukraine cut off the water supply from its side and built several dams. The lack of fresh water caused significant damage to the occupied peninsula, particularly agriculture.

Obviously, restoring water supply to Crimea was one of the Russians' main goals when they launched their full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The occupiers blew up and damaged several dams on the North Crimean Canal in the early days of the war, and water from the Kakhovka reservoir flowed into the occupied Crimea.

The occupation and control of the entire Kherson region could be used to move west to the port city of Odesa in the future. It also allowed preparing an offensive in the direction of Mykolaiv, Kryvyi Rih, and Zaporizhzhia for the further occupation of Ukrainian territory. The liberation of Kherson is tactical and strategic in nature, as the invaders are now completely losing control of Ukraine's right bank.



With western longer-range weapons, the Ukrainian military gradually launched a campaign in late summer to **isolate Russian forces** on the Dnipro's right bank. This was accomplished by shelling bridges used by Russia to resupply its forces in the city. The Antoniv bridge, for example, was

used to secure the Russian army grouping in Kherson and the western part of the region. Simultaneously, Ukrainian armored and artillery unit divisions launched a tough offensive on the city from the north, west, and south.

Nevertheless, the geographical location and climate environment **slowed down the Ukrainian offensive**. In particular, thanks to the wide-open fields of the region, crossed by irrigation canals, the enemy managed to take excellent defensive positions. The arrival of autumn also turned much of the **land into the mud**. It should be added that the most experienced fighters were transferred to this region and ammunition and other supplies were accumulated, which also complicated the offensive.

Indeed, the transition of control over the city to Ukraine is a significant event that will boost the morale of the troops and the population, as well as motivate Ukraine's Western partners to continue to assist Ukraine in liberating its territories. For Russia, this was a breach of state authority and a kind of political defeat because it failed to ensure the security of a part of the newly annexed territory.

According to Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, the decision to withdraw troops should be assessed as appropriate in this situation from a military standpoint. The Russians failed to provide adequate coverage of the Dnipro crossings from Ukrainian army artillery fire (primarily from HIMARS systems), and thus failed to deliver material and technical means to combat units on time. Despite the fact that the Russians were able to repel the attacks on multiple occasions, keeping troops in this area resulted in losses for the invader.

The relocation of the frontline in the Kherson region to the Dnipro River implies that **any future offensive operations by either side will involve forcing the river**. However, neither Ukrainian nor Russian troops currently have the capability to carry out a large-scale landing operation. In the case of Ukraine, its implementation is entirely dependent on the willingness of the West, which would have to provide all necessary resources. As a result, it should be assumed that the Dnipro line will become the "long-term temporary" border of Russia's occupied territory.

Russia will also most likely try to make gains in other areas to compensate for the retreat from Kherson. Units withdrawn from the Kherson front could be redeployed to eastern Ukraine in order to concentrate as many forces as possible to complete the occupation of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. As a result, Ukraine should prepare itself for an escalation in Donbas in the coming weeks. Russia's response to the defeat in Kherson could also involve a wave of massive air strikes on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure.

Therefore, it is important to remember that while the liberation of a part of the Kherson region and the city of Kherson is a strategic success, it is far from a complete victory. After all, Russia still controls the coast from the Sea of Azov to Mariupol, as well as sea routes in the Black Sea and the territories of seven Ukrainian regions.