

Interview with Prof. Walter Feichtinger for The Nikkei

June 23/27, 2023

The following interview was given to the Japanese Economic Daily, The Nikkei, on June 23 and June 27, 2023. Quotes got published on June 27, July 2 and July 6, 2023.

The articles can be found at:

<https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOGR04BTS0U3A700C2000000/>

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Two weeks have passed since the beginning of the Ukrainian counteroffensive. How would you assess this period?

It was very interesting that the counteroffensive was not declared officially. But conclusions could be drawn from various events. The Ukrainian army heavily bombarded Russian defensive positions to weaken their supply forces, logistics, and command facilities. Afterwards, attempts were made at various locations to find a gap by launching attacks to assess the strength of the defensive positions at those points. These attempts have been ongoing for about two and a half weeks now, and even according to the Ukrainian account, the situation is not as simple as one might have expected. This is not surprising. The Russian side had many months to prepare specifically for this, and it is always easier to prepare a defence than to launch a bold attack. The results of the first 14 days are probably a bit sobering from the Ukrainian perspective, but from an analytical standpoint, it is not surprising.

Do you believe that the Ukrainian military can achieve results by the NATO summit in July?

Based on the current situation, I do not expect substantial changes to occur in the coming days and weeks. We are talking about mid-July, which is three weeks away. That would be very fortunate for Ukraine. They will certainly strive and try for it. However, I am somewhat sceptical because, in these 14 days, we have seen that the Russian side has prepared intensively, it has apparently also learned within its leadership system, and now it reacts more flexibly and rapidly. They have also deployed attack helicopters, which pose a significant threat to the attackers.

Ukraine has reported shooting down attack helicopters. How much of an impact can this have?

Firstly, it should be noted that all information regarding losses or shoot-downs should be approached with the utmost caution because it is part of the propaganda. Therefore, I am very cautious here. Secondly, as long as it involves individual shoot-downs, it does not make a significant difference on the Russian side because the Russian military has the advantage of being able to replenish and produce their equipment and shift it around. Russia has a logistical and force advantage in this regard.

What are your expectations in the medium to long term?

The goal of Ukraine is to make a decisive breakthrough, either to isolate Crimea and advance towards the Azov Sea or to maybe reclaim a large area in the east, moving towards Luhansk, east of Kharkiv. Whether that is achievable cannot be assessed today. However, it is already clear that only a small portion of the forces prepared for this attack has been deployed by the Ukrainian side. Therefore, if they manage to find a weak spot somewhere, the intention will certainly be to rapidly advance and secure the gained territory militarily against counterattacks. I do not rule that out at all because the Ukrainian army has proven to be extremely adept in tactical and operational manoeuvres, and it can bring about changes quickly. To me, it is like cracking a tactical nut: you can imagine the Russian defence line as many hard nuts, and Ukraine is trying to find a bad one that is easy to crack to advance there. Hence, the probing now to see if any vulnerability can be uncovered, and then decisively advance into that gap with reserve forces. We estimate that only about 20-25% of these newly formed forces have been deployed so far. That means Ukraine still has a major trump card in hand, and if a weak spot is found, this can be a decisive factor. In summary, I do not exclude the possibility of a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive, even though the beginning currently appears very difficult.

Could the destruction of the Khakovka Dam prove to be an advantage for Ukraine in the medium term? Could areas blocked by the reservoir become passable?

I see it the other way around. Due to the flooding of the area, a large part of Ukraine and the potential counterattack space for the Ukrainian side is actually unusable. This allows the Russian side to withdraw forces from there and redeploy them to other areas where they are urgently needed. It seems to be the case already as there are reports of Russian troop movements. So, I see the operational benefit on the Russian side, not the Ukrainian side. For Ukraine, it is more of a disadvantage because it eliminates one direction of attack.

What about in the medium and long term?

I expect the negative effect to last for the entire year. The ground has practically been destroyed. It is waterlogged, and we don't know how quickly the open terrain will become passable again. I am very skeptical in this regard. And then the muddy period comes right after. We basically have a window of just three months.

The Russian military seems to have significantly improved its air defence against drones. To what extent does this pose a problem for the counteroffensive?

It is a constant race for hundredths of seconds in terms of weapon systems and their defence. We see this in every conflict. It means that the technicians are highly

challenged to find appropriate solutions here. And this is an advantage on one side one day and on the other side the next day. We have a race in the arms sector in split seconds. If they succeed in intercepting or disrupting Ukrainian drones and preventing them from reaching their targets, it is a disadvantage for Ukraine. On the other hand, we have the same situation on the Ukrainian side, where they have become very successful in defending against Russian air strikes with missiles, cruise missiles, and drones. This means that the Russian side also has to deploy an incredible amount of equipment to achieve some success. We will see this race repeatedly. It affects all weapon systems in use, where constant improvements are being made to increase or maintain their effectiveness.

How could the strategies change in the second half of the year?

The focus on the Russian side is clearly the defence of the captured territories. President Putin has announced that elections will even take place there in September. So, the train is heading further towards the Russification of the captured areas. Therefore, defence and repelling any possible Ukrainian attacks are certainly the top priority. That doesn't mean that there couldn't be small local attacks from the Russian side. However, they would have more of a tactical character, aiming to inflict damage on an opponent at a specific point of the front line, endanger them, and hinder further advances, among other objectives. But I don't expect a major Russian offensive this year. They likely don't even have the offensive capabilities for that. The goal is definitely to defend these areas and bring them closer to Russia.

Zelensky warns of Russian sabotage at the Zaporizhia nuclear power plant.

Of course, nuclear power plants and their surroundings are extremely critical areas. We have seen that a dam can burst when it is blown up, creating a completely different situation. And if we put aside all scruples, it is not entirely unthinkable that the Russian calculus may be to render the power plant unusable for the enemy if they themselves do not want to advance further into that region. However, releasing radioactive radiation in such a controlled manner that it does not affect their own soldiers who are only 50 kilometres away and only affects those of Ukraine, I consider that to be unthinkable as well. Therefore, the warning is certainly justified, but currently, I see no signs that it could become part of the warfare.

Based on the statements by Prigozhin and Putin made on June 26, how do you assess the current situation?

I would say both gentlemen are under extreme pressure to explain themselves. They have become aware that everyone has become unsettled: the population, the security apparatus, Putin's inner circle, and presumably even the mercenaries who are now at risk of going from heroes to traitors. Therefore, it was an unsuccessful attempt to signal a normality that does not actually exist.

Reconciliation between Putin and Prigozhin seems impossible. How could the absence of Wagner mercenaries in the Ukrainian conflict affect the Russian army and the Ukrainians?

In the war in Ukraine, we can differentiate between the regular Russian armed forces and the impact it may have there. In terms of combat effectiveness, I would say it can have an impact. Combat effectiveness stems from how convinced soldiers are of their mission. The mission was previously defined by Putin as protecting Russians and pushing back Ukraine due to the perceived threat of a NATO attack. Prigozhin himself disproved that. And this doubt could take hold in the minds of commanders on the ground and ordinary soldiers. Therefore, it would not be surprising if the combat morale decreases to some extent.

As for the mercenaries themselves, they have taken on extreme tasks, such as in Bakhmut. They are, to some extent, a crisis fire brigade for special operations. And now the question is whether and in what form at least parts of this Wagner group will be available for such tasks. Because if they are integrated into the regular armed forces, their combat capabilities will likely suffer because then they will be under the normal chain of command, which has not been particularly effective on the Russian side so far. If they are formed into a new element and kept ready as a crisis reaction force for special tasks, they would still have great value for the Russian soldiers and commanders in Ukraine.

On the Ukrainian side, it certainly has a political and psychological impact by saying, "Look how weak the enemy is. Maybe they will even collapse. We just need to try harder, and we will achieve victory."

However, I don't foresee any immediate impact on the battlefield in the near future because it does not have that significance right now. The Wagner group has not been involved in combat operations in the past two weeks but has already been withdrawn.

Wagner has also played a significant role in Russian foreign policy in regions like Africa. How does the absence of Wagner affect this?

I don't expect the Wagner units to disappear. We must keep in mind that foreign missions are a central component of Russian foreign policy that is directed against Western stabilisation efforts. That will continue to exist and remain of great importance. From what I've heard, there are already initial attempts to continue these foreign missions. It remains to be seen whether a separate command will be formed for this purpose and how it will be done. But I am certain that these operations will continue.

Perhaps under a different flag than Wagner?

Possibly the Wagner flag will remain. I don't rule that out, but there will certainly be a well-coordinated collaboration with the Russian Foreign Ministry and the Russian Ministry of Defense. They will surely be put on a tighter leash.