# A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ART OF DECEPTION FROM THE 2022 KHARKIV COUNTEROFFENSIVE

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*The use of deception in military operations has been a key tactic throughout history, and the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive provides a fascinating case study in the art of deception in warfare. This essay delivers an in-depth analysis of the various deceptive tactics employed during the counteroffensive, including concealment of troop maneuvers, misinformation campaigns, and feint attacks. By examining these tactics in detail, the study aims to shed light on the effectiveness of deception in current military operations and to draw lessons for future operations planning. The approach of the case study presented facilitated a comprehensive understanding of how deception was used in the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive, while also facilitating the identification and confirmation of key enduring principles, types, and methods of deception employed by the military forces involved. The essay also sets the stage for discussing the particularities of military deception from a theoretical point of view and how it was employed in the operation, but also its impact on the outcome of the Kharkiv campaign.*

*Keywords: deception; surprise; counteroffensive; perception; operational advantage.*

## Introduction

Deception, particularly in the realm of information operations, is a multifaceted phenomenon that involves the intentional creation of misperceptions to achieve specific goals. The art of deception has been a crucial element in military strategy throughout history, allowing commanders to deceive their enemies and gain the upper

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hand. However, considering the technological evolution of the intelligence collection sensors nowadays, there are voices that question the effectiveness deception tactics. Regardless of becoming more challenging and complex, The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has demonstrated in numerous instances that this is not the case (Russian War Against Ukraine. Lessons Learned Curriculum Guide 2023, 27). Deception has been a longstanding tactic used by both sides throughout the entire conflict so far.

The human mind is the target of deception and regardless of technology it remains susceptible to deception (Michael Bennett 2007, 12). Deception operates on the fundamental principle that humans can be influenced by false information or manipulated through psychological tactics exploiting their vulnerabilities and cognitive biases.

The 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive was a significant military operation focused on regaining some of the Russian occupied territories in the Kharkiv region, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy and boosting the Ukrainian morale. The operation involved a complex array of tactics and strategies, some considering it a German blitzkrieg reminiscent (Shandra 2022). The operation was also characterized by a high level of deception, which played a vital role in shaping the outcome of the military campaign. The remarkable success of the Ukrainian operation emphasizes the fact that "deception must be an integral part of all operations" (Planning and Execution Handbook 2018, 6-2). By analyzing the tactics and techniques used during this counteroffensive, we can gain valuable insights into the effectiveness of deception in warfare.

After the failed Russian invasion at the beginning of the conflict, the fighting along the front has largely degenerated into a grinding war of attrition. However, on September 6th, 2022, Ukrainian forces launched a bold counteroffensive in the vicinity of Kharkiv that swiftly turned into an astounding triumph. In only six days, Ukrainian forces recaptured an area of about 6,000 square kilometers and advanced up to 70 kilometers into Russian-held territory, posing a threat of encirclement, driving Russian forces from the area, and seizing a sizable quantity of Russian military munitions and equipment (Ryan 2022). Balakliya, Izium, or Kupiansk, among others have all been recaptured as a consequence of this counteroffensive. However, this could not have been possible without the coordinated efforts of Ukrainian military leaders and the effective use of deception tactics to surprise the Russian forces and gain a strategic advantage.

The 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive serves as a prime example of deception operation; therefore, we consider it is crucial to delve into the various strategies and tactics employed in support of its objectives to understand the art of deception in contemporary warfare. To this end, the paper analyzes the theory of deception and its application in the context of the counteroffensive. The article serves as an entry point for outlining the perpetual nature of deception and its impact on military

operations. It also highlights the necessity of understanding deception in modern warfare considering its importance and relevance regardless of the modern transparent battlefield. Moreover, it offers a theoretical analysis that examines various tactics and techniques employed, shedding light on the intricacies of deception in warfare.

### *Problem statement and aim of the study*

Regardless of its strategic importance, the 2022 Kharkiv Counteroffensive remains an understudied subject. Many of the available sources primarily focus on the military aspects of the operation, leaving the art of deception largely unexplored. For this reason, the lack of comprehensive analysis on the tactics and psychological aspects of deception used during the counteroffensive represents a significant gap in current military studies. Consequently, it is imperative to conduct a thorough examination of the deceptive strategies employed to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities involved. As such, the aim of this paper was to address this gap by providing a theoretical analysis of the art of deception from the 2022 Kharkiv Counteroffensive.

### *Methodology*

To fulfil this aim, we have conducted a qualitative analysis to better understand the intricacies of deception used in the Kharkiv Counteroffensive, the findings of this analysis having the potential to provide valuable insights into the strategic use of deception in current military operations. In accordance with this approach, we have used an inductive reasoning in order to generate valid and reliable conclusions based on the data collected (Lisa M. Given, 2008, p. 429). It is recon that most of the qualitative studies make use of an inductive reasoning process (John W. Creswell, 2023, p. 276). As a consequence, it was not a hypothesis testing study, but rather a research question driven. Consequently, the main research question that guided the study was: *How did the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive use the theory of deception to achieve its objectives?*

In line with the methodological options previously presented, we have employed a case study strategy to investigate the art of deception employed during the 2022 Kharkiv Counteroffensive. Due to the limitations of an ongoing conflict, we have only employed secondary data from various sources that monitors the evolution of the conflict. However, their importance in research is well acknowledged in the academic community (Walliman, 2022, p. 102). We have adopted a historical approach analyzing the chronological events that led to the surprising Ukrainian counter offensive on September 6th, 2022. Further-on, we have interpreted all these from a deception theory perspective, identifying key deception indicators and events, but also specific tactics and procedures the Ukrainians employed.

***The potential value of the study and its target***

The results of the study can have multiple benefits: enhancing military knowledge on a subject critical to the operational success in today's confrontations, ensuring a deeper historical documentation, but also providing an educational tool that could be used in training and educational programs, to mention just a few of the potential impacts of this analysis that highlights its value. As such, the target audience of the article can be military commanders and planners, but also academic institutions and researchers interested in the art of deception and its impact on military strategies.

***Paper structure***

To address the main research question and fulfil the aim of the study we have structured this paper in three main parts. The first part provides a theoretical analysis of deception operations, the second part examines the historical context of the 2022 Kharkiv Counteroffensive and the third part offers an analysis of this operation from a theoretical deception perspective.

## 1. A Short Theory of Deception

"No major operations should be undertaken without planning and executing appropriate deceptive measures" (AFM 2018, 3A-1). Thus, understanding the intricacies of the art of deception in warfare is crucial for maximizing the success of military operations. As such, the aim of this section is to provide a brief overview of the key concepts and principles of deception in warfare.

As previously mentioned, deception has been a part of military strategy for centuries and a key component in achieving victory on the battlefield (Friedman 2017, 73). The numerous advantages it can provide for military commanders make it an indispensable tool for achieving victory on the battlefield. Reducing casualties, providing freedom of movement, and enabling surprise attacks are just a few of the benefits deception offers that may increase operational success during military endeavors (Robert M. Clark 2019, 36) (Lyndon Benke 2021, 76).

Deception implies the deliberate act of misleading or tricking targeted enemy decision-makers into believing something that is not true and behave in a way that is contrary to their best interests, in support of the deceiver objectives. The purpose of deception is to mislead the adversary and cause them to misinterpret the operational situation by creating confusion and uncertainty. Moreover, deception operations should have a clearly defined target, which is the adversary's decision-making body that has the appropriate power to generate intended enemy behavioral change. The outcome of this change should facilitate a favorable position for the deceiver, by portraying operational advantages on the battlefield in their favour.

The success of deception hinges on the ability to manipulate information and perceptions to induce a desired response from the target audience. Deception

operations should also be planned and executed in a way that exploits the adversary's cognitive biases and decision-making processes. When properly employed, deception can be a powerful tool in military strategy. It may be used to influence the enemy OODA loop (Observation, Orientation, Decision, Action) in order to slow down the enemy and disrupt their decision-making process, ultimately creating opportunities for exploitation. Figure no. 1 illustrates key common themes within the deception literature with respect to its definition.

The first step in incorporating deception in the overall concept of operations is to define its potential goals and objectives. The goals are those intended operational effects that deception can achieve in support of the military operation, and may include diverting enemy attention, concealing true intentions, achieving surprise, ensuring freedom of action or inducing the enemy to make incorrect assumptions about friendly forces by creating confusion among its forces. It is also important to note that the goals of deception can vary depending on the specific operational circumstances, but they are always designed to support the friendly operation in some way.

Deception objectives, on the other hand, focus on the external conditions. They reflect the enemy intended reaction to the false indicators portrayed by the deceiver. In other words, the objectives reflect what the enemy needs to do in order for the deception goals to be fulfilled. For example, if the enemy needs to redirect their forces to a specific location, the deception goals would be to make them believe that the main attack is coming from that direction.

Moreover, one should carefully consider the employment of deception. It is essential to understand the potential impact on both the enemy's and our own operation. A risk analysis process should also be conducted to identify potential vulnerabilities and mitigate them before they can be exploited by the enemy. If deception is not suitable in the respective operational circumstances, or is too risky and the benefits are few, it may be more advantageous to disregard its employment. In such cases, alternative strategies should be considered to achieve the desired operational outcomes. However, if it is assessed that deception is suitable, then a detailed plan for implementing it must be developed. This should start with designing achievable goals and objectives for the deceptive operation, which represent the bedrock for any deception plan, ensuring that they align with the overall strategy and are realistic given the resources available.

After this step is paramount that a desired enemy perception is set. This concept plays a crucial role in the art of deception as it represents a fundamental aspect of manipulating the target audience's beliefs and actions, thus allowing the objectives to be achieved. This enemy false representation of reality is what shapes their choices and actions. One can notice the crucial role that the enemy's desired perception plays in achieving the deception objective.

This concept is closely related to the target of deception. It aims to create a desired perception in the target's mind. The art of deception is used to manipulate the target's understanding of the situation. It can shape the desired perception and lead to certain actions or inactions. This perception can be influenced by various factors such as the information presented, the communicator's (channel) credibility, or the emotional appeal of the message. Personal experiences and biases, but also societal and cultural norms can also play a significant role in shaping the desired perception. All these factors can greatly influence the way individuals perceive and interpret information; thus, a proper analysis of the target is very important in the deception process.

Once the goals, objectives and desired perception of the enemy have been established the next step is to devise a strategy to shape the narrative. It is the time to properly select the most effective techniques, methods, types, tactics and means of conveying the desired message in order to mislead or confuse the enemy.

According to the literature, the two types of deception are: A-type and M-type, both make use of one of the key enduring features of the nature of warfare, uncertainty. A-type, or ambiguity producing deception focuses on creating confusion by increasing uncertainty and doubt in the enemy's mind by overloading the enemy intelligence process with information or by employing conflicting information to make it difficult for them to make accurate decisions. Creating multiple plausible scenarios for the enemy to consider and react to, A-type deception is used to sow seeds of doubt and hesitation. On the other hand, M-type deception, also known as misdirection deception, aims to lead the enemy into believing a certain reality that is actually false. It involves planting false information or using dummy equipment, but also creating diversions to distract the enemy attention, determining them to act in a way that benefits the deceiving party. These diversions can take many forms, such as feigning an attack or spreading disinformation through various channels, as we shall see, happened in the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive (Bouwmeester 2021, 425-426).

Furthermore, there are two main methods of deception: simulation and dissimulation. Simulation involves creating a false appearance, while dissimulation involves concealing the truth. Both methods are used in military tactics to mislead and confuse the enemy. The goal of simulation is to create a false impression of the size, strength, position of forces, or timings of friendly actions, that the enemy will act upon, leading to operational advantages for the deceiving force. Similarly, dissimulation involves actively concealing the true nature of one's actions or intentions, leading the enemy to make incorrect assumptions. Each of the two, according to some specialists, have three sub-methods. As such, simulation can be achieved through masking (concealing the true nature of an object), repackaging (altering the appearance of an object), and dazzling (obscuring the true nature of an

object), while dissimulation can be accomplished by mimicking (imitating another object), inventing (creating a false appearance) and decoying (creating a false target). All of these methods of deception are crucial in military strategy and have been used throughout history to mislead and confuse enemies.

In addition to these methods, there are several specific tactics appropriate to each of the two big methods that can be employed for deception in warfare (George-Ion TOROI 2023, 27). As simulation involves creating fake or false information to mislead the enemy, display, feint, demonstration or disinformation are commonly used tactics. On the other hand, dissimulation involves hiding true intentions or capabilities through camouflage and concealment, but also denial. All these tactics are critical to the success of military operations and can be seen throughout history in various battles and campaigns. It is worth noticing that using it in combination can increase the effectiveness of the deception tactics employed. The use of simulation and dissimulation together can enhance the effectiveness of the deception tactics employed.

Moreover, several recognized techniques present how deception can be utilized to manipulate the adversary's perception of reality and create the desired operational advantage on the battlefield. Some examples include presenting to the enemy an obvious solution that they believe to be true and reinforcing their false perception, conditioning them to expect a certain response by repeatedly demonstrating a pattern of behavior that lulls the enemy into a false sense of security, suppressing the force signature in order to confuse the enemy regarding the size, location and future actions of friendly forces, or to lure the enemy in what they believe to be the proper reaction.

The means of deception represent specific resources used to execute the deceptive actions that convey the message to the enemy. These are either physical, technical or administrative. Physical means include tangible resources such as camouflage or dummy equipment. Technical means involve the use of technology for communication, interception and creating false electronic signals. These can include cyber-attacks, electronic warfare, and signal jamming. Administrative means imply spreading false information or using forged documents to mislead the enemy.

Once the proper type, methods, tactics, technics and means have been carefully selected, the art of deception can be effectively employed to achieve the desired outcome. To this end, a specific deception story that incorporates multiple events to convey the deceptive message to the enemy collection assets must be constructed with precision and executed with utmost care and attention to details. Creating a convincing narrative and controlling the flow of information is essential for successful deception operations. This requires a deep understanding of the enemy's cognitive biases and current situational awareness, but also a thorough analysis of

its intelligence capabilities and the likely responses to minimize any risk. When developing the entire scenario, it is recommended to consider the principles of deception. These will help structure deception story to maximize effectiveness and minimize the risk of detection. Understanding the principles of deception is essential in effectively implementing strategic tactics and achieving success in military operations.

An important concept in this respect is selecting the proper deception channels. These represent the specific pathways through which the enemy receives the false information. Considering the features of the current information environment, social-media has become a significant channel of deception, allowing for the spread of misinformation and propaganda at an unprecedented rate. This has led to a blurring line between truth and fiction, making it difficult for the public to discern what is real and what is not. Moreover, this channel can have far-reaching consequences, shaping public opinion and influencing political decisions.

History has demonstrated that deceptive tactics can be employed through various channels of communication such as double agents or diplomatic assets, but the most important one is the enemy intelligence collection sensors. NATO recognizes six intelligence disciplines (AJP-2 Allied Joint Doctrine for Intelligence, Counter-Intelligence and Security 2020, 3-1 - 3-2) all of which playing a crucial role in delivering the intended message. These include ACINT (Acoustic intelligence), HUMINT (Human intelligence), IMINT (Imagery intelligence), MASINT (Measurement and signature intelligence), OSINT (Open-source intelligence) and SIGINT (Signals intelligence). Each discipline provides unique opportunities for deception and can be employed in different ways to mislead the enemy.

When selecting the channels of deception, it is crucial to understand that time is an important factor. It is of utmost importance to deliver a message in a form that the enemy can decipher, but also at a moment when its collection asset is likely to detect it. Moreover, in order to increase the chances of the deception success, the deceiver must carefully exploit any potential weaknesses in the enemy's intelligence network. It is also advisable to synchronize the deceptive message across multiple channels of communication.

To sum up, the entire theoretical model presented in this section provides a sound framework for analyzing and understanding the art of deception in the context of the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive. However, in order to fully comprehend the intricacies of deception employed during the operation, one should first consider the operational context up to and during the counteroffensive, which we will present in the next section. This will provide a comprehensive understanding of the strategic and tactical elements at play.

## 2. The 2022 Kharkiv Counteroffensive: Overview

The Russian invasion of Ukraine started on February 24th, 2022, has transformed into a full-scale military conflict which has been going on for several years now. What should have been a three-day engagement (N. R. Jack Watling 2022, 1) has turned into a prolonged and devastating war of attrition, resulting in significant loss of lives and widespread destruction, without a foreseeable end. "It is the largest conventional armed conflict in Europe since World War II" (Koffman 2024, 99).

Multiple inaccurate planning assumptions, bad tactical coordination and logistic support, but also undermining the Ukrainian response led to significant setbacks for the Russian forces during the initial phase of the conflict. As a result, the Russian forces faced unexpected resistance and suffered heavy casualties. It is acknowledged that "soldiers defending their own homes and families are far more motivated than invaders" (David Petraeus 2023, 334). Counting on the support of international allies, the Ukrainian military successfully repelled the Russian advance from seizing the two big cities in the country, Kiev and Kharkiv, and ruined Russian plans to quickly overthrow the Ukrainian government. The successful defence was a turning point in the conflict, demonstrating the resilience and determination of the Ukrainian forces. Russians were forced to retreat by the end of March from Kyiv, Sumy and Chernihiv regions (Nathan Hodge 2022), and by May they were pushed back to the border, in Kharkiv (Ukrainian forces in Kharkiv reach Russian border 2022) (Ryan 2022).

After these setbacks, Russia shifted its focus towards Donbas (Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi 2022, 34-43) (Koffman 2024, 111), making up for a manpower shortfall with a 12:1 superiority in artillery fire. During this time, they shot almost 20,000 rounds on average every day (Franz-Stefan Gady 2024). A grinding war of attrition and massive artillery duels characterized this period of the conflict (Koffman 2024, 99). The constant bombardment took a toll on both the soldiers and the civilian population.

As Ukrainian forces were outgunned and out of ammunition, the number of casualties increased. Western support became essential at this point. The Ukrainian forces were in desperate need of assistance. And starting with April 2022 it came, especially in the form of precision-guided missiles and long-range artillery. This allowed the Ukrainian forces to disrupt Russian supply lines and communications, weakening the enemy's ability to coordinate and sustain their operations, and ultimately helping to stabilize the front lines.

Regardless of some advancements in the East Front, Russian forces continued to face heavy resistance from Ukrainian defenders and were halted in their attempts to make significant progress in the Donbas region (O. V. Jack Watling 2024, 7), being forced to resort increasingly to defensive actions (Dmytro Kruhliak 2023). The Ukrainian defenders, despite being outnumbered and outgunned, displayed remarkable resilience and determination.

A critical detail in the development of the conflict was the arrival of the rocket artillery system (HIMARS) (Porter 2022) in late June 2022, which provided the Ukrainian forces with increased firepower and strategic advantage. This allowed for an extension of the operations in the south, in Kherson, adding pressure on the Russian forces, which was an essential element in support of constructing later-on the deception story for the Kharkiv counteroffensive.

However, both Kharkiv and Kherson were of critical importance to Ukraine. It was never a question of choosing between them, but rather how to exploit Russian vulnerabilities into regaining them both. Kherson was never of secondary importance to Kharkiv for the Ukrainians (Freedman 2022). The city's strategic location and importance in the region made it a key target for both sides. For the Ukrainians, getting it back was crucial in order to regain control of the region and stop Russians' advancement towards Odessa. Moreover, the region could become a strategic foothold from which to launch further offensives against the Russian forces in order to recapture Crimea, which was annexed by Russia in 2014 (Ryan 2022). Moreover, the region's economic importance and geographic position cannot be overstated. The Russian perception on the location of the next Ukrainian main effort was greatly influenced by these factors.

The plan for the counteroffensive was quite simple. Make the enemy believe that Kherson will be the location for the attack, thus determining them to reinforce this defensive position, while leaving Karkiv less defendable, where the actual offensive will take place. This strategic deception was a key element in the success of the Kharkiv counteroffensive, as it allowed for the element of surprise and caught the Russians off guard.

After many prior events to make the Russian believe Kherson will be the counteroffensive location, on August 29th, President Zelenski actually announced this southern operation, contributing to the reinforcement of the Russian perception. The Ukrainian forces used various tactics and strategies to achieve this, all of which will be analyzed in the next section of the paper.

As a consequence of this shaping operations the Russian forces moved many of their experienced units to deal with the threat posed by the Ukrainian forces in Kherson, leaving the defence of the north-eastern areas weakened (Freedman 2022) (Russia's War in Ukraine: Military and Intelligence Aspects 2022, 22). This led to a significant shift in the balance of power in the Kharkiv region and set the stage for the subsequent events of the counteroffensive, which started on September 6th (Ukraine's southern offensive 'was designed to trick Russia' 2022). The Ukrainian forces launched a coordinated attack against the Russian invaders, resulting in a rapid advancement of the Ukrainian forces, being able to recapture Balaklia, Kupyansk and Izium in just a couple of days. The success of the counteroffensive was largely attributed to the strategic deception employed by the Ukrainian military. The surprise

attacks caught Russian forces off guard and inflicted significant casualties, allowing the Ukrainian troops to gain significant ground as it can be seen in the Figure no 1.
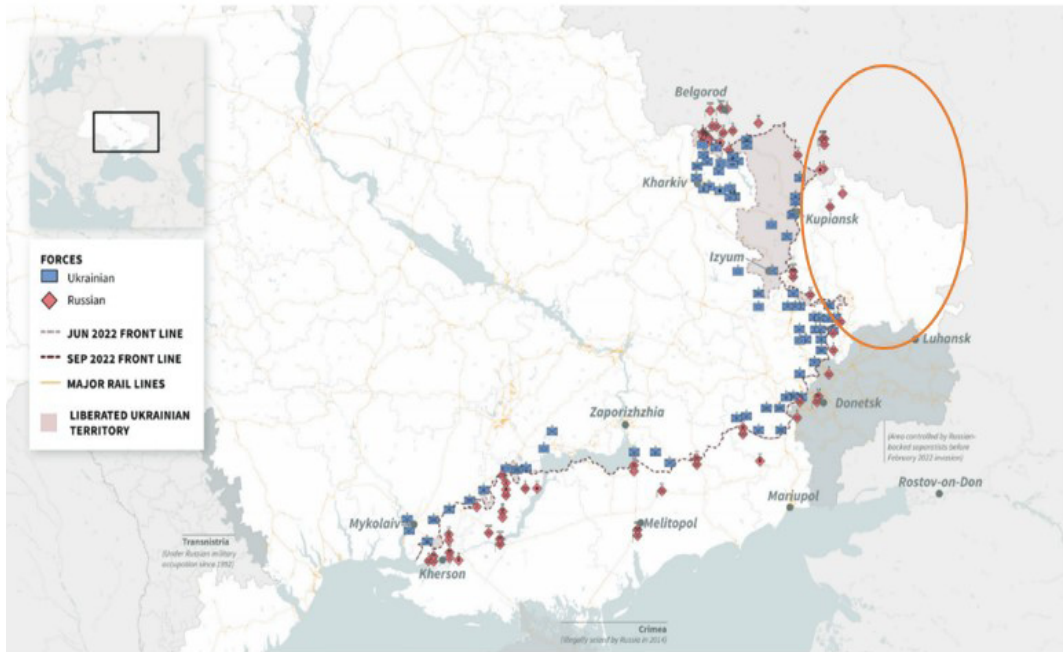


**Figure no 1:** Operational situation after the Kharkiv counteroffensive
(Seth G. Jones 2023, 19)

The counteroffensive has proven to be a turning point in the conflict, with significant implications for its future, some calling it the masterpiece of Ukrainian military actions (Ioniță 2023, 43). Deception has been an essential element in recapturing Kharkiv and subsequently Kherson (Nagl 2024, 51), the surprise being one of the main factors of success (Dmytro Kruhliak 2023). Moreover, it is said that the surprise attack was planned in the same simulation center as the 2003 invasion of Iraq, in Germany (David Petraeus 2023, 368).

The main consequences of this magnificent operation demonstrate the high level of success of the Ukrainian 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive. Regaining some lost territory, bolstering the Ukrainian morale (Freedman 2022), consolidating international support (Isabelle Khurshudyan 2022) are only a few of them. As for the Russians, beside losing the momentum on the battlefield for the rest of the year, after this embarrassing retreat, Putin declared partial mobilization acknowledging the personnel shortcomings and seeking ways to regain the initiative on the battlefield (Ryan 2022). Also, on October 8th, Putin designated general Sergei Surovikin the first sole commander to lead Russia's war across the entire theater.

To sum up, it is evident that the use of deception played a crucial role in the success of the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive. In the next section, we will do a theoretical analysis of the events that shaped the success of the counteroffensive.

## 3. Main Results of the Theoretical Analysis of Deception in Support of the 2022 Kharkiv Counteroffensive

The art of deception has been a significant strategy in warfare throughout history, and the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive provides a compelling case study for understanding its theoretical underpinnings. The Ukrainian operation has demonstrated that "the more successful the deception in support of a plan, the greater the chance the plan will be successful" (Robert M. Clark 2019, 35). This was a strategic deception planned and coordinated at the highest levels of military command and approved by the president himself, according to a report written after interviewing most of the military commanders involved, including the mastermind of the operation, Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi (Isabelle Khurshudyan 2022).

In this section, we will analyze the theoretical concepts presented in the first section of this article in the context of the deception operation in support of the Kharkiv counteroffensive. First of all, it is important to understand whether this was indeed a deception. In this respect, after analyzing the theoretical definition and comparing it to the events of the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive, we have come up with the following results:

− the events prior to the Kharkiv counteroffensive had the purpose to mislead the Russians making them misinterpret the situation. Moving many of their assets in the southern front to respond to the fictious threat created by the Ukrainians there, thus weakening their positions in the north-east is a clear indicator of the effectiveness of the Ukrainian strategic deception;

− the primary target of the operation was the Russian military-political leadership (Kharuk 2023);

− believing the threat in the south and acting upon it means that the events prior to the counteroffensive have created a behavioral change for the Russians;

− the outcomes of this events have created operational advantages for the initiator which resulted in significant territorial gains.

After this analysis, we can definitely conclude that the events prior to the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive were part of an elaborate and sophisticated plan to deceive and mislead the opposing forces, thus ensuring a strategic advantage for the Ukrainians.

Further-on, we will do an analysis of the deception story that had unfolded before the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive. As previously mentioned, the story was quite simple. Make the Russians believe that the Ukrainian counteroffensive will

come from the south, in the Kherson region, act upon it, and then launch the actual offensive from the north-east, in Kharkiv region, catching them off guard (Freedman 2022). As such, the most likely goal of deception was to regain the initiative and surprise the Russian forces in the north-east front, thus ensuring freedom of action for the Ukrainian forces in their offensive operation to regain control over the territory in this area, lost during the initial stages of the conflict. Subsequent deception objectives in achieving this goal included:

− Russian forces will redeploy forces and equipment to reinforce their positions along the southern front;

−Russian forces will redeploy their forces and equipment from the north-east or nearby locations that could have affected the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkiv, leaving the area vulnerable to attacks;

− Russian forces will ignore Ukrainian offensive preparation in the Kharkiv region.

In order to accomplish these objectives, the Ukrainians had to create the following desired enemy perception: there will be one single Ukrainian counteroffensive in the near future, in Kherson area, while, at the same time, there is no imminent threat in the Kharkiv region.

In table no. 1 we have summarized the key deceptive events that led to the success of the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive. In the same table, where needed, we have also offered interpretations in accordance with the theory of deception.

As part of the deception story, in order to make the enemy believe that there was no real threat coming on the Kharkiev front, the Ukrainians took some effective measures to conceal their true intentions and hide their actual preparations for the counteroffensive. According to a military source with knowledge of the operation, an essential part of it comprised locating informants in Kharkiv areas under Ukrainian control to prevent them from providing the Russians with information on Ukraine's preparations (Ukraine's southern offensive 'was designed to trick Russia' 2022). Furthermore, The Ukrainian reconnaissance started to collect information in the area that helped them better prepare the attack, whilst, at the same time, did some counter-reconnaissance missions to deny the Russian access to real information that would have compromised the counteroffensive preparation (Ryan 2022) (Strachan 2022). This was a success as "the local Russian command failed to pick up any signs of the impending assault" (Freedman 2022). Figure no. 2 highlights how successful the Ukrainians were in hiding their troops. It is a representation of the forces display in the Kharkiv region before and right after the counteroffensive started. One can easily notice that there were no indicators of an imminent attack in the region, Ukrainian forces being perfectly concealed.

**Table no 1** Key deceptive events that led to the success
of the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive

| Date | Event | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|
| *July 09, 2022* | Statement made by Iryna Vereshchuk, Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister in charge of temporarily seized territories, urging the residents to leave Kherson and Zaporizhia provinces. This communication raised concerns about an imminent military operation in the region. (Plokhy 2023, 211) | - using the media and diplomatic channel of communication. |
| *July 10, 2022* | Oleksii Reznikov, the Ukrainian Defense Minister announced in media the coming counteroffensive: "The president has given the order to the supreme military chief to draw up plans (Zelensky ordered to reconquer the south of Ukraine - Reznikov 2022) | - using the media and diplomatic channel of communication. |
| *July 12, 2022* | In Melitopol, a major transportation hub on the left bank of the Dnieper, witnesses saw columns of Russian vehicles moving towards Kherson. (Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 12 2022) | - positive feedback on creating the desired perception for the Russians. |
| *July 13, 2022* | The Russian military started fortifying the routes leading up to the Antonivka highway bridge, east of Kherson city. Additionally, they increased the quantity of patrols in Kherson area. (Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 13 2022) | - positive feedback on creating the desired perception for the Russians. |
| *July 19, 2022* | Ukrainian attacks on the three bridges over Dnieper in Kherson area started (the railway and highway bridges at Antonivka, located north of Kherson, and the bridge that links Nova Kakhovka with the Beryslav region near the Kakhovka Dam). Using HIMARS the Ukrainian delivered the first significant attack on the Antonivka highway bridge, devastating both the structure and the nearby fortifications. (Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 19 2022) A lengthy essay in the English-language Kyiv Independent suggested that the two Antonivka bridges – the highway and railway bridges, as well as the Kakhovka Dam Bridge had to be destroyed in order for a counteroffensive to be successful. (Ponomarenko 2022) | - creating the false threat. |
| *July 20, 2022* | Sergei Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister, issued a statement declaring that his country's ambition is no longer limited to Lugansk and Donets, but extends to Kherson and Zaporizhia as well. (Trevelyan 2022) | - positive feedback on creating the desired perception for the Russians. |
| *July 26, 2022* | New HIMARS attacks on the bridge, rendering heavy machinery unsuitable to cross it. (Video from Antonivka Road Bridge in Kherson shows extensive damage 2022). The Russians tried initially to repair it but, after another hit in August, decided to install a pontoon bridge, which was also targeted by the Ukrainians. (Axe, The Bridge Battle In Southern Ukraine Is Escalating 2022) | - conditioning enemy perception towards the false location of the attack; - the installation of the pontoon bridge was a feedback indicator of the successful deception story so far. |
| *July 27, 2022* | Oleksii Danilov, the secretary of the Ukrainian Defence Council, revealed that the Russian troops had significantly repositioned to the south, specifically towards Kherson, and he speculated that this may be to halt the Ukrainian counteroffensive. (In the Kherson direction began "very powerful" movement of Russian troops - Danilov 2022) | - reinforce the enemy perception that its response is good; - using the media and diplomatic channel of communication. |

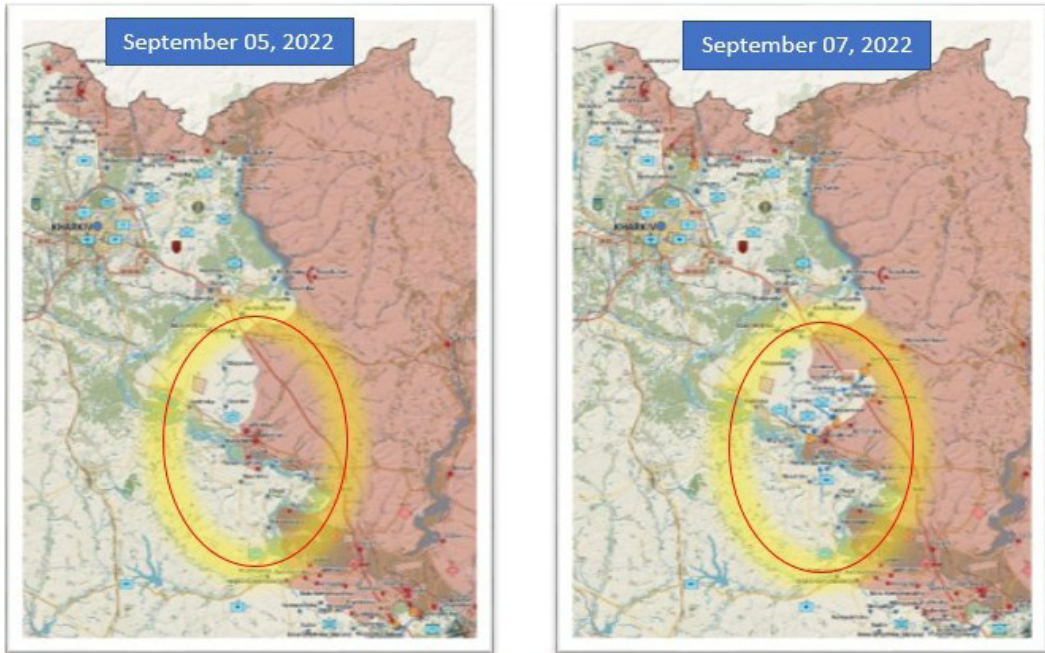| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *July 30, 2022* | Ukranians hit the Antonivka railway bridge over the Dnipro at Kherson, making Russian forces unable to resupply, by rail, their positions on the west bank of the river. (Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, July 30 2022) | - reinforcing the false threat. |
| *August 01, 2022* | Russia is transferring forces from the east (Slovyansk) to reinforce the southern effort and prepare the defence for the Ukrainian announced counteroffensive. (Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 1 2022) | - positive feedback on creating the desired perception for the Russians. |
| *August 02, 2022* | Russia continues to redeploy forces to Kherson (airborne troops from Donetsk). (Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 2 2022)<br><br>Russian forces continued, throughout August, to transfer forces and equipment to counteract the Ukrainian announced counteroffensive in Kherson. | - positive feedback on creating the desired perception for the Russians. |
| *August 09, 2022* | Russian airbase close to Saki, in Crimea, was struck by Ukrainian missiles. Ten Russian planes, the backbone of the air force of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, were destroyed as a result of the strike, which also blew a weapons storage on the airport. (Ukraine claims responsibility for Crimea attacks 2002) (Plokhy 2023, 216)<br>Despite assertions by Western sources of a planned Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkiv area, the Ukrainian General Staff did not mention anything of the subject in its evening report. (Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 9 2022) | - reinforcing the false threat.<br><br><br>- dissimulation effort on the Ukrainian side. |
| *August 11, 2022* | Ukrainian strikes Russian command posts and also ammunition depots in the Southern area. (Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 11 2022) | - reinforcing the false threat. |
| *August 17, 2022* | Western sources record that Russian mass redeployment of troops and equipment from Donbas and Crimea to Kherson in preparation for the Ukrainian counteroffensive. It is assessed that Russia has 30 BTG on the river's right bank. (Ukraine Strategy Targets Russian Army's Lifelines in Kherson 2022) Consequently, concerns were raised by Ukrainian officials regarding the decision to announce the counteroffensive. | - positive feedback on creating the desired perception for the Russians.<br><br>- reinforcing enemy false perception. |
| *August 20, 2022* | Ukrainians continue to strike enemy positions and ammunition depots in Kherson. (Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 20 2022) | - reinforcing the false threat. |
| *August 23 - 26, 2022* | Ukrainians continue to disrupt enemy activities in Kherson region by targeting GLOCs (ground lines of communication). (Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, August 24 2022) | - reinforcing the false threat. |
| *August 29, 2022* | President Zelenski announced the beginning of the counteroffensive in Kherson. (President of Ukraine 2022)<br>Other officials reinforce the location for the counterattack, but also the full commitment of the Ukrainian people. (Ukrainian adviser warns progress will be slow as southern counterattack begins 2022)<br>The media around the world reiterated the beginning of the counteroffensive in Kherson contributing to the enhancement of the disinformation campaign. (Ukraine's southern offensive 'was designed to trick Russia' 2022) | - reinforcing the false threat.<br><br>- using the media and diplomatic channel of communication. |

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|---|---|---|
| *September 02, 2022* | Sergei Shoigu, Russian Defence Minister, stated that "this action was planned by Zelensky's office with one single goal—to give their Western sponsors the illusion of the Ukrainian Armed Forces' capacity to manage an assault." (Shoigu announced the attempts of the APU to the Nikolaev-Kryvorozhsky and other directions 2022) | - positive feedback on creating the desired perception for the Russians. |
| *September 03, 2022* | The Kakhovka dam bridge was severely damaged by the Ukrainians, a great part of it collapsing into water. | - reinforcing the false threat. |
| *September 04, 2022* | Ukrainians made some local gains from the start of the counteroffensive, targeting Russian command posts, GLOCs or logistic depots. (Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 4 2022) | |
| *September 06, 2022* | Russians redeployed forces from north-east to reinforce the defensive line in Kherson, formations from one of its best army's unit, the 1st Guards Tank Army (GTA), being spotted in the area. (Axe, Russian Troops are Dashing around Ukraine Trying to Block Ukrainian Counterattacks. 2022) Only Russian volunteer forces and activated reservists from the "people's republics" of Luhansk and Donetsk manned the Russian positions in Kharkiv region. (Trofimov 2024, 268). Based on American intelligence, the Ukrainian found out that only half of the Russian units were still stationed in that area as opposed to a month before. (Isabelle Khurshudyan 2022)<br><br>At the same time, Ukrainians launched the real counteroffensive in Kharkiv region. The five brigades conducting the attack were reinforced with some of the best Western weapons' systems. This was a concealed operation that had happened across the previous weeks. (Ukraine's southern offensive 'was designed to trick Russia' 2022) (Isabelle Khurshudyan 2022) Ukrainian forces advanced very easily because of the effects of surprise on the Russians and the lack of a coordinated response on their side. | - positive feedback on creating the desired perception for the Russians.<br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br>- positive feedback on the success of the deception story. |

From the course of the events presented, it is obvious that the Ukrainians pulled an M-type deception, in order to mislead the Russians into believing that the counteroffensive will take place in the Kherson area. This strategic move allowed the Ukrainian forces to successfully execute their planned counteroffensive.

As for the deception methods, one can notice that the Ukrainians employed both simulation and dissimulation in order to mislead the enemy forces. It is a fact proven by history that the use of simulation and dissimulation combined can be extremely effective in military operations. Simulation involves creating a false appearance, which the Ukrainians did with the false counteroffensive in Kherson, while dissimulation involves concealing true intentions or capabilities as they did in Kharkiv region prior to the real attack. This employment of both these methods was highly effective allowing the Ukrainian forces to gain a strategic advantage over the Russian forces.

In accordance with these methods, several tactics were employed:

*Display*. Portraying more troops in the Kherson area to distract Ukrainian forces and draw attention away from the real target in Kharkiv.

**Figure no 2:** Force disposition in Kharkiev region (Kharkiv Front 2024)

*Feint*. The Ukrainians have conducted multiple attacks in the southern area to create the illusion of a major offensive as it can be noticed in Figure no. 3 that depicts offensive operations conducted by the Ukrainians in Kherson area.
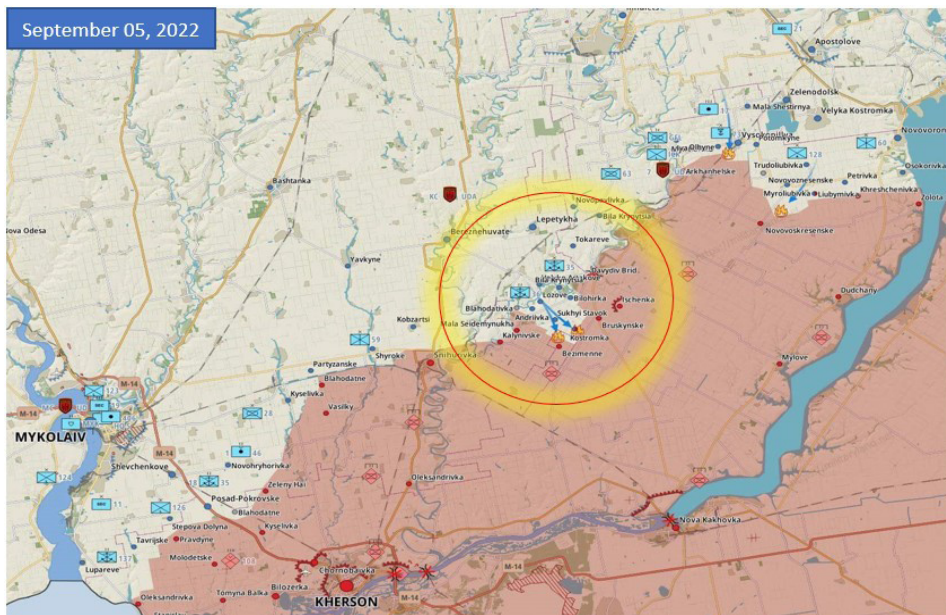


**Figure no. 3**: Feint attacks in Kherson area (Kherson Front 2024)

*Disinformation*. Disinformation has played a significant role in shaping Russian perception with respect to the location of the counteroffensive. In this respect, media has been used to reinforce enemy's perception on the false attack.

*Camouflage*. Ukraine has kept a low profile for the accumulation of forces in Kharkiv area in order to make the Russians believe that there are no imminent Ukrainians attacks in this area.

*Denial*. Denning Russians reconnaissance ability to collect relevant information that might have disclose real intentions of the Ukrainians through counter-reconnaissance missions as previously presented.

Furthermore, Ukrainian forces have made use of two main deception techniques. The obvious solution, making the Russians believe that Kherson will be the next logical move and then reinforcing that perception regarding the location of the counteroffensive. In the same time, Ukrainians have taken measures to suppress the signature of their force's accumulation in the north-east front, thus contributing to surprising the Russians on September 6, the beginning of the real offensive.

Moreover, it is worth noting that various channels of communication, such as media outlets and diplomatic channels, have played a significant role in shaping Russians' response to the deceptive observables that have been portrayed in Kherson. These platforms have proven to be instrumental in disseminating information and influencing their perception. While it is undeniable that Russian intelligence collection assets have served as a pivotal channel in this regard, it is important to acknowledge that the analysis at hand solely relies on open-source information, thus we cannot provide concrete evidence regarding their usage.

Feedback, one of the key principles of deception, was critical to the incremental success of the operation. Based on the indicators that we have highlighted in Table no 1, the Ukrainians had the opportunity to assess the progress of their operation, adapt it and optimize it in order to create the desired perception for the Russians and achieve the deception objectives. In this way, they made the story as credible, consistent, verifiable and executable as possible, which is actually another important principle of deception. Reinforcing the enemy beliefs through exploitation of their confirmation bias, also represented a key component of the Ukrainian deception plan.

## Conclusions

Since ancient times, deception has been a vital component of military strategy, and its value cannot be overstated. The 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive was no exception. This operation shows how important deceptive tactics can be to military strategy even today, as modern technology continues to advance. The use of disinformation and feigned movements allowed the Ukrainian forces to gain a strategic advantage. Furthermore, this operation demonstrated that modern

transparent battlefield is an illusion. Exploiting the fog of war, but also the enemy's preconceptions can significantly contribute to the success of military operations. Deception, as demonstrated again by the Ukrainians in the recent Kursk intervention is as relevant as ever. As such, it must be carefully studied and understood in order to be effectively employed by military forces.

The current study has done just that, offering a theoretical framework of deception analysis in the context of the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive. The analysis was focused on identifying key concepts specific to deception operation and reconstruct the Ukrainians approach on the counteroffensive. The value of this work lies in its potential to inform future military strategists and tacticians. Furthermore, the study might offer insights into the psychological aspects of deception in modern warfare and emphasize the importance of maintaining the element of surprise. Additionally, the paper highlighted the importance of media as a key channel of deception in the current operating environment, in addition to disinformation as a critical tactic of deception.

In conclusion, the 2022 Kharkiv counteroffensive demonstrated that deception is as viable today as it was more than 2000 years ago, when Sun Tzu stated that all warfare is based on deception, surprise still being possible in this "transparent battlefield".

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