

Securing the Fortress Belt: The Military Importance of Ukrainian- Held Territory in Donetsk



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**Briefing of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

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The membership of the OSCE has expanded to 57 participating States, reflecting the breakup of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys numerous missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <www.osce.org>.

ABOUT THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is an independent U.S. Government commission created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance by the participating States with their OSCE commitments, with a particular emphasis on human rights.

The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <www.csce.gov>.

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Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Washington, DC

The briefing was held from 2:00 p.m. to 3:12 p.m., Room 210 Cannon House Office Building, Kyle Parker, Chief of Staff, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Mr. PARKER: All right. It is 2:00 p.m. I would like to welcome everyone to our briefing today on Ukraine's Fortress Belt on behalf of Chairman Roger Wicker and the entire leadership of the U.S. Helsinki Commission. My name is Kyle Parker.

While Russia's occupation of every inch of Ukrainian territory from the southernmost peninsula of Crimea to the northernmost reaches of Kharkiv is a criminal act of unprovoked aggression and civilians in these regions are in grave danger, today we are going to look at some of the factors at the operational level of war and perhaps a little bit at the tactical level of why the Fortress Belt cities and this region of Donetsk Oblast is of critical importance to Ukraine's defense and to safeguarding larger population centers in Ukraine, such as the city of Dnipro and Ukraine's second-largest city of Kharkiv.

With that, I turn this over to my colleague, Connor O'Kelley, who will moderate our discussion and field public questions following the remarks of our panelists.

Thank you all.

Mr. O'KELLEY: Thank you, Kyle.

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for coming. Thanks for joining us today for this important discussion that seems more timely than ever. My name is Connor O'Kelley, and I am a policy fellow here at the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission.

For those not familiar with us, we are an independent U.S. Government agency created in 1976—this is our 50th anniversary—focusing on security and human rights in Europe. We are bipartisan and bicameral in terms of our composition of congressional commissioners.

Many of us here in Washington counted the fourth anniversary of Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine this February, but for the inhabitants and defenders of Kramatorsk, Sloviansk, and Kostiantynivka, it has been twelve years since Russia first invaded the Donbas under the guise of separatist rebels. After more than a decade of war

and repeated large-scale offensives aiming to push Ukraine fully out of the Donetsk region through the sheer weight of numbers, Ukraine still retains control over approximately 20 percent of Donetsk Oblast, largely concentrated in the region that we are looking at today, known as the Fortress Belt.

This name was not earned lightly. Over the past decade, Ukraine has developed the most extensive system of fortifications in its occupied territory in this region, concentrated around the cities that I mentioned previously and the dense urban landscape surrounding them. So far, these defenses have held fast against Russian assaults despite numerous prognostications and predictions that they might fall.

Over the past year, in addition to its offensive campaign on the ground, Russia has intensified a parallel strategy of pressuring Ukraine to cede control of its remaining territory in this region at the negotiating table. In multiple rounds of peace talks and backchannel negotiations, Russia has made it clear that Ukraine's withdrawal from Donetsk Oblast is one of the pillars of a potential deal that it refuses to compromise on.

This briefing is aimed at unpacking, as Kyle said, what makes the Fortress Belt unique from Ukraine's perspective, from the perspective of its defenders, and understanding exactly why Vladimir Putin is so intent on gaining control of it either on the battlefield or at the negotiating table. Our experts will tackle this issue from multiple angles, looking at both the topographic and geographical features that make the belt such a valuable asset for Ukraine's defense, looking at its operational significance, and looking at the economic and other aspects from the Ukrainian perspective as well. You can find their full biographies in the handouts you received, but I will briefly introduce them.

We have George Barros here, the Director of Innovation and Open-Source Tradecraft at the Institute for the Study of War. His work has focused on ISW's open-source intelligence and tradecraft, developing it through rigorous development of methodology and technology integration. He is a longtime Russia analyst and the driving force behind ISW's Russia-Ukraine war updates, which I am sure many of you are familiar with as a high standard in this topic. He is also behind many of the excellent quality maps that ISW puts out, some of which we will have the chance to see today. If you did not receive them, there is also a handout of the maps if you are not able to see the easel at the back.

Elina Beketova is a fellow with the Democratic Resilience Program at the Center for European Policy Analysis. She is the author of "Behind the Lines," a data base and series of articles documenting life in Ukraine's temporarily occupied territories using interviews and open-source methods. She began her career at a local newspaper in Crimea and has also gained over a decade of journalistic experience in Kharkiv and Kyiv.

Robert Rose is a U.S. Army infantry officer serving as the Chief Research Officer at the Modern War Institute at West Point, though he is appearing today in his personal capacity. He has previously advised multiple European armies, including the Armed Forces of Ukraine, as part of his service at the 4th Security Force Assistance Brigade. He has also served at both the National and Joint Readiness Training Centers and deployed twice to Afghanistan.

Without further ado, I will turn it over to our panelists for their opening statements, starting with George.

Mr. BARROS: Thank you, Connor. I would like to sincerely thank the Helsinki Commission for inviting me here today to testify and share the Institute for the Study

of War's assessment of the military importance of Ukraine's Fortress Belt in Donetsk Oblast.

Before discussing the Fortress Belt, it is first important to establish the current State of play on the battlefield. Ukraine's lines are holding and will likely continue to hold. The situation on the battlefield in 2026 is difficult, but not critical. While Russia remains dangerous, a collapse of Ukraine's defenses is unlikely. Russian forces' best prospects for this year are continued marginal gains.

Russia will not seize the remainder of Donetsk Oblast this year. Under optimized assumptions that benefit Moscow, Russian forces may be able to seize Donetsk in late 2027 or early 2028, assuming Ukraine's international partners continue to support Ukraine. Even this forecast, with assumptions favoring Russian performance, is not certain. In February of this year, Ukraine liberated more territory than Russia seized for the first time since 2023—a trend that, if continued and reinforced, will—or can deny Russia the ability to seize the Fortress Belt at all.

The remaining 19 percent of Ukrainian-held Donetsk Oblast is critical. Ukraine's Fortress Belt is a concentration of four large cities in Donetsk Oblast and their satellite settlements that run north to south along the H20 Kostiantynivka-Sloviansk highway. This belt is 50 kilometers long, or about 31 miles—it is about the distance from Washington, DC. to Baltimore—and it had a pre-invasion population of over 380,000 people. Ukraine has spent the last eleven years pouring time, money, effort, and resources into reinforcing this Fortress Belt and establishing significant defensive infrastructure in and around these cities.

The Fortress Belt is essential to ensuring that Ukraine maintains a geographically defensible frontline in eastern Ukraine. Understanding the topographical significance of the Fortress Belt is highly relevant for U.S. policy.

For the past year, the Trump administration has been leading negotiations with Russia and Ukraine to try to find an end to the war. One of the prerequisites for a robust and sustainable peace is ensuring that at the end of the day, Ukraine maintains a geographically defensible frontline. The bottom line up front is that the Fortress Belt's terrain is well optimized for a strong defensive line, whereas the terrain further west of the Fortress Belt, the land that would serve as the new frontline if Ukraine lost the Fortress Belt, is poorly suited to serve as a defensive line.

We will now dive into the military terrain analysis, which assesses four key characteristics—population density and urban development, including land use, water features, elevation, and slope, and prepared defensive fortifications. First, on population density and urban development. The urban buildup of the Fortress Belt and its satellite towns provides Ukraine with a significant advantage. Urban terrain magnifies the power of defenders and requires attackers to invest a high cost to overcome defenders' advantages. The Russian way of urban warfare is grueling, slow, and attritional. The high cost that Russian forces paid in the Battle of Bakhmut or the Campaign for Pokrovsk will pale in comparison to those necessary to seize the Fortress Belt, again, assuming it is even possible.

It took Russian forces a protracted campaign of nine months to seize Bakhmut, a town of 71,000 people, and a campaign of twenty two months to seize Pokrovsk, a town of 60,000 people. The average population of the Fortress Belt's four cities is 93,000, with Kramatorsk and Sloviansk having populations of 147,000 and 105,000, respectively. The

urban area of the Fortress Belt's main four major cities is over four times larger than the area of Bakhmut and over seven times larger than that of Pokrovsk. By contrast, the terrain west of the Fortress Belt in southern Kharkiv is sparsely populated. This area contains fewer settlements capable of serving as strong points to anchor Ukrainian defensive line and fewer roads to support Ukrainian logistics. Most settlements in the area are small agricultural hamlets and villages.

There are only 18 Ukrainian-controlled towns of moderate size within 100 kilometers of the Fortress Belt. The largest by population is Lozova in southern Kharkiv, which has a prewar population of 53,000 people. It is over 80 kilometers away from the Fortress Belt, and it stands in isolation, far from other towns that could be used to form a line. Maps showing population density data and the location of these moderately sized towns, and the land use, paint a clear picture. The data shows a geographically vulnerable vacuum that would be easier for Russian forces to exploit, should Russia control the Fortress Belt. There is a gaping rural corridor between Lozova and the Iziur forest, which is particularly concerning.

Number two, water features. Water features present major obstacles to maneuver warfare. Crossing defended water obstacles has been an exceedingly difficult task for Russian forces throughout the entirety of this war. The water features of eastern Ukraine play a significant role in making the Fortress Belt's terrain inherently favorable for defense. The Fortress Belt's northern flank is protected by the Siverskyi Donets and Oskil Rivers. The curvature of the Siverskyi Donets forces Russian attackers to prepare—to approach the Fortress Belt's prepared defenses from the eastern direction, headfirst.

In contrast, the terrain west of the Fortress Belt has significantly fewer water obstacles around which Ukrainian forces can organize their defenses. This terrain would grant attacking Russian forces greater freedom of movement and is not optimized to canalize Russian forces into prepared kill zones. The loss of the Fortress Belt would squarely place Russian forces on the western bank of the Siverskyi Donets River and several of its tributaries. This is optimal terrain to continue pushing further west.

Third, elevation and slope. Eastern Ukraine, in general, is very flat. There are micro-terrain features and elevation at slope that optimize the Fortress Belt's terrain for defense. Notably, the Fortress Belt sits atop terrain with steeper elevation values. These micro-terrain details force Russian forces to navigate uneven terrain and provide Ukrainian forces with various tactical high ground positions that lend themselves to defense. High ground is additionally important for modern drone warfare tactics, as radio-controlled drones rely on communications and equipment that are placed on high terrain to maximize signal projection.

In contrast, the terrain that is on the western side of the Fortress Belt has comparatively shallow slopes. Furthermore, this terrain leads into Ukraine's Dnipro lowlands. This is a flat, open steppe and flood plain that is ideal for rapid movement of large forces. If Russian forces controlled the Fortress Belt, Russian forces advancing further west would be attacking into a lowland. For Ukraine, defending from a lowland is suboptimal, as these Russian attackers would be holding an elevation advantage.

Fourth and finally, Ukraine's field fortifications. Ukrainian engineers have built an extensive network of field fortifications over the past eleven years, including multiple miles of fighting positions, anti-vehicle ditches, rows of dragon's teeth, barbed wire, and mine fields that synergize and amplify the naturally defensible terrain features discussed. The loss of the Fortress Belt would require Ukraine to dig new fortifications in southern

Kharkiv and eastern Dnipropetrovsk Oblasts. The physical characteristics of that terrain and its human geography are simply poorly suited for defense.

In conclusion, the Fortress Belt is optimized for defense across nearly every possible topographical and geographical characteristic relevant for a military terrain analysis. The human geography and the natural terrain present a unique confluence of factors in favor of defense, which is exactly the reason why Ukraine has picked this land for where to build elaborate fortifications for a pitched battle. If the Russians were to gain control over the Fortress Belt, they would occupy preferable lines for launching drives into vulnerable terrain that significantly favors attacking forces over defenders. It is for these reasons that the Kremlin's negotiation strategy seeks to secure a political settlement where Ukraine would surrender the Fortress Belt's critical terrain without a fair fight.

I want to emphasize that Russia remains unlikely to seize the Fortress Belt anytime soon. Ukraine's Fortress Belt must continue to serve as the cornerstone of a future Ukrainian battlefield geometry that is militarily defensible. As we continue to discuss negotiations, the reasonable starting point for conflict termination is the current de facto lines of control, including a Ukrainian-controlled Fortress Belt. Ukraine's preemptive surrender of large swaths of strategically vital fortified terrain would be a strategic mistake and undermine the Trump administration's goal to achieve a robust peace. It is not inevitable that Russian forces will seize the Fortress Belt. It is unclear whether Russia's economy, defense industrial base, and force generation system can sustain several years of additional campaigns necessary to seize it. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify here today, and I look forward to the other testimony and the questions.

Thank you.

Mr. O'KELLEY: Thank you, George. I would note that the final map is not in your handouts, due to the potentially sensitive nature. We do not want to be publicizing Ukrainian fortifications.

We will turn it now over to Robert.

Mr. ROSE: Thank you, Connor, for the invitation to speak. I appreciate the U.S. Helsinki Commission providing this opportunity to give a testimony on the importance of the Fortress Belt. Just to be clear, my views are my own. They do not reflect the official position of the Modern War Institute, the United States Military Academy, or the U.S. Army. I hope to supplement the excellent details that George has provided in his terrain analysis with a historical and operational perspective on the importance of the Fortress Belt cities in Donetsk.

Of course, history's most famous example of negotiations ceding fortifications comes from the Munich Agreement with Nazi Germany. Between 1935 and 1938, Czechoslovakia invested in a system of fortifications to delay a German attempt to rapidly occupy it. It aimed to provide time for its ally, France, to relieve German pressure by initiating an offensive against Germany. In the border area called the Sudetenland, covered in mountains and woods, Czechoslovakia built over 10,000 bunkers. With the delaying effects of these fortifications and a robust defense industry, German military leadership was concerned about the prospect of a war in Czechoslovakia and the risk of an allied intervention.

The Nazis sought to overcome these fortifications through diplomacy. They began advocating for the autonomy of the German population in the Sudetenland, leading to the Sudetenland Crisis in 1938. Seeking to avoid war, the British and French acquiesced to

Hitler's demands for the Sudetenland in the Munich Agreement. Czechoslovakia was left with an indefensible border with Germany, and, unsatisfied with the Sudetenland and seeking Czechoslovakia's industry and resources, Hitler pushed into the rest of the country in 1939. Left without any defensive lines to resist Germany's advance, Czechoslovakia quickly surrendered.

We can also find a counterexample in 1939. In the lead-up to the Winter War with the Soviet Union, Finland refused to relinquish its defensive belt. On the Karelian Isthmus, the Finns had taken advantage of the canalizing terrain of lakes and swamps to build a fortification system that anchored an elastic defense, which would prevent the Soviet Union from quickly overrunning Finland. Stalin attempted to pressure Finland to cede the Karelian Isthmus. If Finland had ceded its fortifications, it may well have suffered the same fate as Czechoslovakia. A few months later, the Soviet Union would completely subjugate the Baltic nations, but Finland chose to fight. Even though it did so alone, it prevented a Soviet operational breakthrough and turned the war into a campaign of attrition that sapped Soviet resources. In the end, Finland did cede territory, but it would survive.

In Finland, the Soviet Union attempted an approach that it repeated in 1945 in Manchuria, in 1956 in Hungary, in 1968 in Czechoslovakia, in 1989 in Afghanistan, in 1994 in Chechnya, in 2008 in Georgia, in 2014 in Ukraine, and, again, in 2022 in Ukraine. This approach, called victory delivering lightning war, quite similar to blitzkrieg in name, is a fundamental concept in Russian military culture. It provides a means to prevail in the initial period of war before an opponent fully mobilizes and transforms a conflict into a war of exhaustion. The Russo-Ukrainian war has become such a war of exhaustion.

It is important to understand why. It is easy to focus on drones, which, while important, are simply a continued evolution in trends of war. The chief of staff of the Ukrainian First Corps recently told me how America focuses a bit too much on drones, saying that while they are undeniably important, they are simply a continuation of the evolution of tools of war that started when man first crafted a spear. Their impact must be grounded in other systems, in concepts and organizations, and in a war's unique context. The Fortress Belt is critical to the context of drone employment.

Drones fit into an evolution of war that really accelerated in the 19th century. With nationalism, a system of conscripts and reservists, armies grew to phenomenal sizes. At Waterloo, Napoleon had 72,000 soldiers. A century later, at the onset of World War I, the French mobilized 3.7 million soldiers. Simultaneously, new weapons, such as breech-loading rifles, smokeless powder, machine guns, and breech-loading artillery, forced units to disperse. These larger armies spread across a wider front. The lethality of the new weapons made frontal attacks very costly, while the ancient approach of attempting to flank an enemy became increasingly difficult with such massive forces.

Eventually, a continuous front developed with no assailable flanks. In World War I, armies spread from Switzerland to the English Channel and from the Carpathians to the Baltic Sea. As the war progressed, armies developed methods to synchronize enough combat power to seize the first trench line. That was not the problem. Armies began to employ defenses in depth, which bought time to call forward operational reserves, to seal attempts at a breakthrough, and then counterattack against the culminated attackers, and reestablish a defense. During the 1920's and 1930's, Soviet military thought contended with the idea of an operational breakthrough, of how to return that mobility to the battlefield.

Using tanks, artillery, airborne forces, engineers, and masses of infantry, they developed a doctrine called deep operations to overcome a defense in depth and achieve a decisive victory. For instance, Georgii Isserson calculated that the Red Army must echelon forces to penetrate 100 to 120 kilometers deep. Such a penetration would overrun enemy command posts, artillery, operational reserves, and railheads critical for sustainment. Although these ideas were nearly lost with Stalin's purges, they allowed the Soviet Union to eventually prevail over Germany.

Thinking in terms of an operational breakthrough continues to influence Russian, as well as Ukrainian, and many of the former Warsaw Pact armies that I have advised. Such breakthroughs are far easier when the enemy has not established a continuous defense in depth. During three weeks in the winter of 2022, when much of the world's attention was focused on Kyiv, Russia seized an area in southern Ukraine the size of Estonia and Latvia. Meanwhile, in Donetsk, where Ukraine had been defending since 2014, held. In September 2022, Ukraine took advantage of Russian overextension and the distraction of the Kherson counteroffensive to launch a counteroffensive in Kharkiv, which liberated 12,000 square kilometers, overran many Russian positions, and captured critical Russian equipment.

In the 2023 spring offensive, Ukraine, armed with NATO equipment, could not achieve a similar operational breakthrough against Russia's defense, because the context had changed. However, in August 2024, it surprised Russia with the Kursk offensive by exploiting the thinly defended border. Such breakthroughs, often called maneuver warfare, are possible in the correct context. Russia has been attempting to recreate that context by continuous small infiltrations to identify Ukrainian vulnerabilities and disrupt Ukraine's rear areas. They have also been pursuing a contemporary version of deep operations, using drones, artillery, and glide bombs to disrupt Ukrainian rear areas.

For instance, starting in 2025, the Second Guards Combined Army, operating on a 32-kilometer-wide front, employed three echelons of drone forces, using different drones suited for their missions. The first echelon operated from Ukrainian lines to five kilometers behind them. The second echelon operated from five kilometers to 10 kilometers behind Ukrainian lines and focused on targeting logistics. The third echelon operated from 10 kilometers to 35 kilometers behind Ukrainian lines and targeted Ukrainian command posts, drone operators, drone launch sites, artillery, and sustainment. Other Ukrainian units employ similar concepts, often with teams from the Rubicon Center operating in that third, deep echelon.

Rubicon provides well-trained drone teams that specialize in eliminating Ukrainian drone operators. They have published papers on how to achieve drone dominance over, and blind, Ukrainian units by concentrating on destroying that drone system. Once dominance is established in the sector, they transition to isolating Ukrainians by interdicting their logistics. In 2025, they found success in Dobropillia. Achieving local drone dominance and interdicting logistics routes, the Russians were able to penetrate 15 kilometers into Ukrainian lines. Ukraine rushed the newly formed First Azov Corps to seal the breakthrough and push Russia back.

Also in 2025, Ukraine began to organize its brigades under corps headquarters, which has facilitated better coordination between brigades than the previous ad hoc operational groups. Responsible for looking deep into the battlefield, often 50 kilometers, but up to 150 kilometers, Ukraine corps can better disrupt Russian offensive in their assembly areas and destroy critical Russian equipment. For now, Ukrainian forces are focused on

an attritional campaign, which is outrunning Russia's ability to replace soldiers. Potentially, Ukraine corps could turn the tables on Rubicon and achieve a similar drone dominance to allow for Ukrainian operational breakthrough against attrited and spread-out Russian forces.

That may happen in the future, but for now, we must understand the value of the Fortress Belt cities. Ukraine's defenses in Donetsk have largely held since 2014. As George just detailed in his testimony, Ukraine has invested years in fortifying the terrain around the cities with mines, tank ditches, and dragon's teeth. Most cities have three layers of these defenses. A real value in the Fortress Belt is not just their great tactical fighting positions. Their value comes from their survivability as large urban areas. In one core area of operations in the Fortress Belt Corps, staff told me that they detect between 600 and 700 drones a day and shoot down 300 of them. The Fortress Belt cities allow them to hide from this onslaught. They prevent Russia from disrupting Ukrainian forces in depth to facilitate the operational breakthrough that they seek.

In the noise of cities and in the basements of cities, Ukraine can hide command posts, reserves, drone control sites, munitions stockpiles, maintenance bays, and medical facilities. The cities provide operational depth and endurance to Ukrainian forces. They allow them to rotate combat power to the front and for troops to rest. If Ukraine lost the Fortress Belt, it would lose this operational depth. It has established a fallback position a hundred kilometers to the west of the Fortress Belt, but, just as George described, it is not defensible terrain. There is no conurbation of cities that provides that survivability and that operational depth. It is very similar to the terrain that Russia exploited in 2025 in the south.

If Russia gained the Fortress Belt, it would accrue the operational advantages that Ukraine currently enjoys. It could push forward command posts, drone launch sites, and sustainment to provide additional operational reach to press further into Ukraine, into that fairly undefensible terrain to the west. Russia has pursued axes to attack along cities precisely because it understands their value in providing survivability and operational reach. Just as with the Sudetenland, relinquishing the Fortress Belt to Putin will help him subjugate the rest of Ukraine. Ukraine's defenses will be weakened. If a cease-fire comes, Putin can simply wait for Ukraine to inevitably demobilize its forces and then exploit Ukraine's more vulnerable position to achieve that victory, delivering lightning war that has eluded him.

Often, commentators try to manufacture Putin's intentions, but in his own essay justifying the war, he did not say that some Ukrainians living in Donbas were Russian. He wrote that all of Ukraine was a fake State imposed by the West. He wrote that Ukrainians naturally belong with Russia. He already violated the Minsk II agreement signed back in 2015. He would likely violate any agreement in the future if he sees an opportunity. Peace will only come and be maintained through strength.

Thank you.

Mr. O'KELLEY: Thank you, Robert.

We will now turn to Elina Becketova.

Ms. BEKETOVA: Thank you so much, Connor. Before I start, I just wanted to thank the U.S. Helsinki Commission for the excellent organization of this briefing, the Congress, and everyone who is attending today's briefing. It is a very important topic. You know, this topic is both important for me professionally and deeply personal, because I am origi-

nally from Crimea. I lived in the eastern part of Ukraine, which is Kharkiv, and then in Kyiv for many years. That is why right now, for three and a half years, I am writing about temporarily occupied territories and what is going on there, what Russian strategies are implemented over there, and why it is important for Ukraine to liberate these territories.

I think we have just heard the wonderful assessment—the wonderful military assessment by George Barros, and historical parallels by Robert Rose. I think we already understand that this is not a temporary wartime position, the Fortress Belt, because it is very different from other territories Russia has tried to capture. It has been built and reinforced since 2014, for more than eleven years. We definitely understand that the line sits on very high—on very high ground, like Chasiv Yar, which gives Ukrainian forces a major advantage. Importantly, if Russian forces were to break through here, the terrain further west becomes flatter and much harder to defend. In simple terms, this is Ukraine's strongest defensive position in the Donetsk region.

I just wanted to say that this story is not only about the military side, because it has a major economic impact. Ukraine's mineral wealth is estimated at around \$15 trillion, with more than 70 percent concentrated in the eastern regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, and Dnipropetrovsk. Donbas key resources, coal, especially anthracite, which is essential for energy and metallurgy. To date, about 71 percent of the region's coal mines are located in occupied territories. Before 2014, Ukraine had more than 150 operating mines. Many mines are now occupied, damaged, flooded, or simply stripped of equipment by the Russian forces. Since 2014, coal from occupied areas has been exported to Russia through unofficial schemes benefiting occupation authorities. There are numerous reports about it.

After 2022, Russia began rebuilding roads, railways, and ports to systematically extract resources such as coal, grain, and salt, and move them through occupied ports like Mariupol and Berdyansk. The region also contains Europe's largest rock salt reserves in Soledar, now under Russian control. Perhaps even more significant in the long term is the Yuzivska shale gas field in Donetsk and Kharkiv Oblast, with potential reserves large enough to influence Europe's energy security. There is also lithium, a strategic mineral essential for modern technologies. Ukraine holds around 500,000 tons of lithium reserves. Russia now controls at least two deposits, while others remain under Ukrainian control. This matters because lithium is not mined inside Russia itself, making these resources especially attractive for Moscow, so economically, control over this region is not only about today's war. It is about future energy, industry, and technological competition.

The third dimension, and perhaps this is the most important one, is the humanitarian aspect. When I asked a couple of Ukrainian soldiers about these territories, they told me, "This is our people." We are going to fight for them, and as George has just told us, before the full-scale invasion, more than 380,000 people lived in these cities. Many already experienced Russian occupations in 2014 and were later liberated. They know exactly what the Russian occupation means—filtration, repression, forced passports, disappearances, and forced mobilization. As of October 2025, more than 200,000 civilians still live in the Ukrainian-controlled part of Donetsk region, including 11,000 Ukrainian children, mostly in Kramatorsk and Sloviansk. These are not empty frontline towns. They are leaving cities under constant threat. I just want everyone to understand that these are people dealing with the Russian threats every day. Like, we talk right now, and these territories are being shelled.

In occupied territories, Ukraine reports a systematic campaign of Russification and forced passportization. Residents are pressured to accept Russian passports as a tool of control. By 2021, about two and a half million Ukrainians in occupied Crimea had received Russian passports. Russian officials claim another three and two million were issued in occupied eastern and southern Ukraine, but these figures cannot be independently verified because we do not have access to this territory, and I write about these stories in *Behind the Lines*. You can read it over, and there is also a data base where I try to track what is going on over there.

Refusing a passport comes at a cost. People risk losing property, pensions, healthcare, and basic services. Basically, if you want to prove that this is your property, you need to go to the occupational administration. You need to show a Russian passport. You need to show all the papers, but for that, you need to get this Russian passport. The same with the hospitals and obtaining any healthcare. You cannot obtain it if you do not have the insurance, if the insurance is not connected to the Russian passport. Also, many become trapped and vulnerable to forced mobilization into the Russian Army. Ukrainian authorities estimate that more than 51,000 people from occupied territories were mobilized between February 2022 and July 2025, with the largest numbers coming from Crimea. We know that Crimea has been occupied for twelve years.

Those who resist face detention, often under fabricated charges or during the so-called filtration procedures. Thousands of civilians, possibly up to 20,000 according to different estimates, are believed to be held in prisons or detention centers. In many cases, Russia denies holding them or reclassifies them as Russian citizens and prosecutes them under Russian law. After imprisoning thousands of residents and forcing others to flee, Russia is reshaping the demographic landscape. Authorities offer higher salaries, subsidized housing, and incentives to bring Russian teachers, doctors, officials, and security personnel into occupied areas.

At the same time, education is being militarized and used for indoctrination aimed at erasing Ukrainian identity and reshaping Ukrainian children into loyal citizens of Russia. Ukraine, together with European, American, and other partners, is working to return 20,000 abducted children currently held under Russian control, despite having family members or guardians in Ukraine. These are just a few of the major consequences people face when territory is no longer defended by the Ukrainian Army.

There is also a fourth dimension, history, and our lessons. Ukraine has already experienced a so-called frozen conflict. Crimea was occupied in 2014, and many believed diplomacy would resolve it. Instead, Crimea became a military platform that enabled the full-scale invasion in 2022. That is why this defensive belt matters so much. It is not just a line on the map. It is the line between war contained and war spreading further. It is about preventing a larger and far more dangerous war tomorrow.

Ukrainian forces continue to hold the line, with resilience and with the hope that international support will remain strong. I encourage leaders in Washington, Kyiv, and across the great capitals of Europe to remain united and to remember clearly who we are dealing with in Vladimir Putin's Russia. Thank you so much for your attention, and I look forward to your questions.

Mr. O'KELLEY: Thank you very much.

Let us see. In terms of starting the discussion out, I know, George, you mentioned briefly in your testimony about the Ukrainian counteroffensives that we have seen

recently, just this year. Of course, we know that as offensive tactics have evolved over the course of the war, I am sure defensive tactics have evolved with them. I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about the current landscape with regard to the counter-offensive, how that might have changed the landscape at all, but also how Ukrainian defensive strategy has evolved. Of course, Robert, if you want to join in as well, feel free.

Mr. BARROS: Sure thing. Thank you for the question, Connor.

Starting in January of this year, the Ukrainians have been conducting counterattacks in a slightly different part of the geography of the theater, in southern Ukraine, in Zaporizhzhia and in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast. These counterattacks have been very successful. They have broken out of—the Ukrainians have managed to demonstrate that they can break out of positional warfare, at least when the correct conditionalities and context are achieved. All the records and all the data indicate that the Ukrainians have liberated well over 300 square kilometers of terrain over the past month and a half or so. The Ukrainians claim somewhere around 400–480 square kilometers or so. We were able to verify at least 350 of that, but I am sure it is higher.

What I will say here is that the Ukrainians managed to regain that territory very, very quickly, partially because it is terrain that is favorable to mechanized warfare and maneuver warfare. It is flat terrain. It is sparsely populated terrain. It is not very heavily prepared in terms of the landmine fields and the prepared field fortifications. It is for those reasons the Russians were able to get into it relatively quickly. Due to a variety of mistakes, including Elon Musk cutting off the Starlink services back on February 1st, which helped enable the Ukrainians to counterattack and retake that terrain relatively quickly.

I think the case study and the big KT here is that terrain that is flat, that is not populated, that does not have all these defensible characteristics, can actually change hands relatively quickly. That is important because the terrain beyond the Fortress Belt, if the Russians were to control it through a political settlement, is sort of this ripe terrain that is very vulnerable for this kind of exploitation. That is not the place where you would prefer to have a strong defense.

Mr. ROSE: I think I will just add on that, the importance of the Starlink disruption, and some of the Ukrainians I talked to, though, they were kind of caught by surprise by it. Unfortunately, there was no prepared counteroffensive that they could have done in depth, because there might have been an opportunity there. It does show, like, the importance of context, so that disruption really hurts. I mean, it affected different Russian units in different ways. Some of them relied on it far more.

Russian units, even though they were—they were very—their command-and-control systems just were—became very reliant on Starlink in all of these areas. After a few weeks, they were able to find workarounds, whether it was just using more traditional radio systems or laying a fiber optic wire. You know, we talk all about fiber optic drones, but they started to use them—to lay them now to cutoff units. They found workarounds, and now that they have kind of reestablished that resiliency, that context has been lost.

Mr. O'KELLEY: A question for Elina. You mentioned, I think, the economic dimension. It is very important to keep in mind, as you said, just how much of Ukraine's mineral wealth is concentrated, and fossil fuel resources are concentrated in this region. As you understand it, as you described it, once Russia gains an area, they seem to begin exploiting those resources very quickly. I wanted to ask, in the unoccupied region of

Donetsk, what the extraction of those resources from the Ukrainian side looks like? Is that continuing? If it were to come to the worst-case scenario of the area being lost militarily or by, certainly, we hope not, by negotiation, what might it look like in terms of would there have to—in your view, in terms of the population of those cities, would there be a relocation, or some other measure like that taken?

Ms. BEKETOVA: Well, Connor, thank you so much for the question. You know, I think in terms of the population there, we know that even right now, at this particular moment, there is evacuation. People who want can leave the territory, especially if it is very close to the frontlines and to the Fortress Belt. It is very hard to say, because in some cases it is very hard to lose your home. It is very hard to accept the idea that your home is no longer safe, so it is a very hard decision for people to leave. That is why they decide sometimes, in many cases, like, you would think that it is wild, but people decide to stay just because they cannot leave their house. They have been building it for years. Then you understand that sometimes, in many cases, people do not have places to go. That is why they decide to stay. It does not mean that they are pro-Russian residents.

In many cases, there are multiple reasons why they decide to stay. We all understand if Russian forces—and we see it every day—they use the scorched earth strategy. There is nothing over there, so people have to leave. We cannot say—like, we saw it multiple times before, when there was a nice city with resources, mineral wealth. Then, when Russian forces would come over there, there would be nothing. In terms of Ukraine and extracting over there, it is just not sustainable at this point because there is a battle over there, right? There is fighting. Because I have just said that 70 percent of these mines, for instance, were in the occupied part of this region. Which means that right now, when the battles are ongoing, it is very hard to lead any type of work.

If there is a cease-fire, and we all know that there was a mineral deal exactly signed a year ago, so actually it is very good for Ukraine, because if there is a cease-fire and there is a mineral deal, then Ukraine can regain all this power. It actually will be really good for the future and the energy future of Europe, and for the energy architecture. That is why the question right now is, when is the cease-fire? When Ukraine can actually—you know, together with the American partners—extract resources or work with these resources, because there are so many of them which right now Ukraine does not have the ability to even access.

Mr. O'KELLEY: Thank you.

I think we are going to go ahead and open it to audience questions. If you have a question, please, I think you can come up to the podium. Activate the mic and ask whichever of the panelists you would like to ask a question to.

Yes. Please feel free to come up, yes.

QUESTION: Thank you for this assessment. I have a few questions.

Basically, we are seeing a war of attrition with incremental territorial shifts. What, if anything, could realistically change the battlefield dynamic in the next six to twelve months? Second question, Ukraine has demonstrated innovation in drone warfare and systemic tactics. How critical is Western military aid at this stage? Is it still decisive, or has the war reached the point of strategic equilibrium? The third question is about Russian ability to actually move forward. What are their positions? What are their positions militarily? Are there risks that they would go further, even in talking about Europe, Eastern Europe?

I forgot to say, my name is Myroslava Gongadze. I represent the office of Brian Fitzpatrick.

Thank you.

Mr. O'KELLEY: Thank you. I will open that to whichever panelists want to take that. I know there are multiple angles.

Mr. ROSE: Yes, for the transition from—what could change the attritional context of the war. Right now, I mean, Ukraine's policy has been very focused on leaning into the attritional nature of it. It is trying to take more Russian soldiers off the battlefield than Russia can replace. I think that, for now, is an appropriate step for them to take, but at certain point, with the success of that attritional approach, it will thin out Russian forces enough that it can give that opportunity for an operational breakthrough. for a more maneuver warfare approach.

As well as, you know, Russia no longer has those in-depth defensive lines that Ukraine tried to penetrate back in 2023. It has this much more open battlefield. With the production of drones that Ukraine has had, and this transition to a corps—to the use of corps to fight this deep battle, they can disrupt Russian forces in depth to create that advantage—that opportunity for an operational breakthrough. I think that there is that potential.

In terms of—you know, but it is hard to know exactly when that dynamic will shift. You know, a lot of that will be, you know, a deep understanding of Russian forces and their capabilities, and where their operational reserves are and, you know, how their defenses are laid out, but that potential is there. I know the Ukrainian Corps is looking to exploit such a situation.

Mr. BARROS: Thank you. Thank you for the questions, Myroslava. To answer, how do we get out of the war of attrition, I think we are starting to actually—we are leaving the positional warfare. We are leaving the war of attrition. It was very interesting to see just a few weeks ago, Ukrainian armored personnel carriers operating in Zaporizhzhia as part of the southern counteroffensive. This is a sort of activity that we have not seen in a long time. When we had the Khartiia guys attacking near Kupiansk back in November, they were bringing heavy equipment up to the frontline to support the troops.

The Ukrainians are discovering how to achieve tactical drone dominance and exploitation sectors despite persistent Russian drone threats. The Ukrainians are achieving, in space and time, the ability to reintroduce mechanized vehicles to sectors of the front, which is how they are actually doing these counterattacks. The Ukrainians do not fight the way the Russians do, with weak waves of a lot of dismounted infantry. That is not the Ukrainian way of fighting. The corps system that the Ukrainians introduced over the last year is maturing. The Ukrainians are doing more intermediate-range strikes to degrade Russian logistics and depth. I think that is maturing quite nicely. We should continue to build that and reinforce that to then get to an exploitation phase, which I think is very much possible.

Your question is, is Western aid still decisive? Absolutely. The tank is not obsolete. Actually, tanks are needed. Armored personnel carriers are needed. Ukraine does not manufacture those. There is a clear need for those systems. Intelligence is vital as well. Artillery shells that are produced at scale in the West are also still very important. On your final question, do the Russians pose a threat to other countries? Absolutely.

There was no requirement for the Russians to redo their command-and-control relationships and dissolve the Western Military District and create a Leningrad and Moscow military district, with the former focused on the Baltic states and Finland. The creation of new corps, the moving away—you know, the undoing of the 2008 Russian military reforms to reinstitute a corps structure to have more mass so that Russia can fight wars of the future, realizing what it could not do in Ukraine. I think these are all strong indications that the Russians have plans well beyond Ukraine.

Mr. O'KELLEY: All right. Feel free to come up. I think we might collect a few questions. If there is anyone else who has a question, you know, feel free to come up afterwards.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you so much to the panelists. My name is Olivia Piotrowski. I am a graduate student at Johns Hopkins SAIS.

My question is, what is Poland's role in fortifying the Fortress Belt? How has their spending affected the war itself?

Thank you so much.

Mr. O'KELLEY: If there are any further questions, you can come up. Otherwise, I have a few more prepared, but—thank you.

Mr. BARROS: I am not intimately familiar with what Poland's done, but what I will say is the Fortress Belt has been an all-hands-on-deck effort from many countries. Because digging and excavation and manufacturing and field fortifications of that magnitude are not done monolithically by one person or one organization. I mean, there have been—I am sure the Poles, and I know definitely the Americans, there have been crowdfunding efforts for diggers, excavators, you know, like, like, industrial-sized equipment. That is all part of this. I would have to go and study. I am not—I do not know offhand. Poland's—the Poles have done a tremendous amount to support Ukraine. I am sure that has helped build the Fortress Belt for the past eleven years.

Mr. ROSE: Yes, I can, you know, talk specifically about Polish involvement in the Fortress Belt. Can just say, you know, Poland has been, you know, at the lead in Europe in terms of its military modernization and spending. It has been very impressive what the Polish Army has accomplished in the last few years. It also has this huge stockpile of old Warsaw Pact equipment. It has been a lead donor of equipment to Ukraine, with the stockpiles it has, which has helped Ukraine a lot.

QUESTION: Good afternoon. Thanks for taking my question. My name is Reece Dower. I am with the Medill News Service.

We know that President Trump is willing to issue ultimatums to adversaries and allies alike as a sort of negotiating tactic. My question is, if in the name of expediency, looking to cut a deal with the Russians, he gives the Ukrainians the choice to either cede the Fortress Belt or risk losing U.S. support, is the Fortress Belt strategically important enough that that should be a red line for the Ukrainians to make that gamble?

Thank you.

Mr. BARROS: Sure. Sure. I think that is the—you have described the de facto position. The Ukrainians rightfully refuse to cede the Fortress Belt. Nor should they. It is also, however, I think, part of the administration's strategy. They want this to be not a Band-Aid fix. They want a robust end to the war, and not have a repeat of Minsk 2015. Within that strategy is actually the requirement of having a geographically defensible frontline, which is not possible without the Fortress Belt. I think the strategic goals are—as stated,

good. There has been a lack of understanding of the importance of this particular geography as actually being one of the prerequisite parts of that.

By the way, that is why the Russians are so compelled and trying so hard to basically say, well, it is just an additional 400,000 kilometers of terrain. “We are on the verge of peace in our times, if it were not for the Ukrainians just being particularly stubborn about this terrain.” Whereas in reality, this is actually the decisive terrain that is important to ensure that there is a solid end to Russian adventurism in eastern Ukraine.

Ms. BEKETOVA: If I may add just a few words about, again, the history and our lessons. Because I feel like with this Fortress Belt, it kind of reminds the whole situation with Crimea. For many, many years, Ukrainians were told that, you know, the diplomacy will work, that it will fix everything. Then, in eight years afterwards, we saw how the Crimean Peninsula had been used by Russian forces to advance and to shoot missiles over on the mainland of Ukraine. That is why, to me, this particular Fortress Belt reminds of this situation, because clearly, we heard the military assessments that Russian forces will gain the strategic advantage afterwards by moving toward Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, Dnipro, right, and Kharkiv region.

Even at this particular moment, we understand that Dnipro, or Dnipropetrovsk region, is also shelled. It is not like there is a magic pill that there are territories in Ukraine that are not affected or attacked. They are. It is just right now, Ukrainians have this very strategic point and height and defensive line that has been reinforced and built for almost twelve years. That is why this is so crucial. That is why Ukrainians have been able to hold this line for so long, because a lot of efforts, money, and, unfortunately, people were used there in this particular land to defend it. That is why Ukrainians have been holding it, and hopefully they will continue to do it.

Mr. O’KELLEY: Thank you. I think we are coming close to an hour, so I will turn it back over to our Chief of Staff, Kyle Parker, for some concluding questions for the panel.

Mr. PARKER: Thank you. Thank you, Connor. Thank you all for your insightful remarks. I think I have probably too many questions to ask in our remaining time, but I will—maybe I will throw a few out, rapid fire, and free to address the ones you see fit.

Elina, I really do appreciate your focus on the human domain of the fight. It is certainly our focus here. We are, first and foremost, a Commission that focuses on human rights and specifically the Helsinki commitments. These are the commitments that are most infringed in Russia’s illegal, genocidal war against Ukraine. All ten principles of the Helsinki Decalogue, and, of course, the definitive principle of the Helsinki Final Act, namely, the territorial integrity of states. We have all had to get a little bit smarter in the human rights world in the hard power domain, given that we are looking at the largest war in Europe since 1945, and probably the largest war in the world since the Korean War.

Certainly, have an impression that human rights advance in Ukraine at the barrel of a Ukrainian gun, or not at all. We know what we have seen. You know, what Ukrainian forces in liberated areas have discovered—mass graves, torture centers, torture facilities, and detainment centers for children, even. I remember that was a discovery when Kherson was liberated, so, you know. I think we also look at the civilians in occupied territories. There is also the question of what we do not see in occupied territories, which are significant populations that wish to go home, right? That this is not just land. This is their home. You know, it is—I think it is important to count them too.

In the economic domain, I would just—you know, if there is anything to say as we look a little further west and south to some key features, namely, the Zaporizhzhia power plant, the largest nuclear power plant in Europe, and what that means for Ukraine's energy needs. Of course, Ukraine's use of the Dnieper River to export and access the Black Sea. You know, certainly, there is a physical feature there in the Kinburn spit that chokes it off and precludes the reopening of the Mykolaiv Port.

Maybe perhaps for the—looking at the military or the operational workup, Rob and George, what are the centers of gravity of the two forces? What do you see in the quality of assaulting forces along the line? I would assume that they are not of uniform quality, and that Russia has placed its best in assaulting the Fortress Belt. How are we to recognize culmination points in these two massive armies?

To throw it out, I was trying to find a place where it may fit more naturally, but the question of the use of air power in this war. It is an interesting question. It feels like it is more absent than expected. Obviously, Ukraine has, you know, Western fighter jets in the fight now. Russian—you know, certainly Russia has never achieved air dominance due to Ukrainian air defense. If there is anything there you think is significant to wrap with, I would certainly be interested in hearing it.

With that, I thank you.

Ms. BEKETOVA: Well, thank you so much, Mr. Parker. I want to wrap up with two sentences or two paragraphs on the militarization of education and militarization of the current population in the temporarily occupied territories, because this is also a very important humanitarian side. Because if we talk about the current generation of young people, not everyone has an opportunity to get out. Sometimes we have cases when a 20-year-old teenager from the occupied part of Ukraine decides to enter a university in Ukraine. There are many cases like this, but not everyone is so brave.

That is why we have to unite in the efforts to think how we can break through and how we can stay in touch with teenagers who might not know the Ukrainian language, or who have been targeted, and whose Ukrainian identities have been erased for so many years. I really ask everyone to unite here in these efforts because we can keep their Ukrainian identities, even if they are staying in the temporarily occupied territories. This is a very important thing. This is something that I have been thinking for a long time. We need to understand how to deal with the militarization of education, cadet classes, Yunarmiya, Movement of the First—everything that is going on in the occupied parts of Ukraine, because Russians are systematically pouring a lot of money and efforts into this militarization.

The second question about the Zaporizhzhia Power Plant is a very important issue. We also need to solve it and understand that it is under Ukrainian control, because it will be safer. Coming back to the question of the mineral reserves, Ukraine possesses 117 of the world's 120 most-used minerals. It still lacks the technology and investment needed to fully develop them. Partnership with American companies can help close the gap while strengthening the economic resilience of the broader Western alliance. I just wanted to wrap up on this note. Thank you so much.

Mr. ROSE: Yes, so, oh man, center of gravity. That is always a tough debate. I know some of the Ukrainians I talked to thought—it was interesting—they thought that Russia viewed the Ukrainian center of gravity as logistics. How they wanted to—you know, Russia—with Rubicon, these approaches, to achieve that drone dominance, to blind

Ukrainian forces in certain sectors, where then they could range fairly freely to isolate Ukrainian units from resupply, from refit, from rotating forces. Some Ukrainian units get cutoff, you know, for weeks, and are unable to be replaced. This would give an opportunity for Russia to break through, to infiltrate Ukrainian lines in these areas, and turn all these infiltrations into a deeper operational breakthrough.

I think that Russia's approach probably does see that as a center of gravity, at least for the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Probably a little bit different if you are talking about it at a strategic level. Similarly, for Ukraine with Russia, it is kind of a war of exhaustion. Oftentimes, there is not a simple center of gravity for a State to attack. Ukraine, obviously, at the strategic level, has been targeted in a lot of Russia's economic infrastructure, particularly oil, refineries, trying to make this into a battle of will, of economics, you know, and sap support for the war in Russian society, and the economic strength—the capacity that Putin has to continue this war machine going.

Down at the operational level, I think, yes, it is tough because if you look back at 2023, why the Ukrainian counteroffensive did not succeed then, there are a lot of reasons behind it. You know, and so obviously, the drones make it hard to mass. Then there are minefields. There are multiple layers of defense that, even if you get through the first layer of minefields in that Russian defense, there is a second layer, and there is a third layer. There are operational reserves that Russia poured in once it identified the main axis of attack of Ukrainian forces.

You kind of have to overcome all these systems and disrupt it in such depth that, you know, they cannot bring those operational reserves because they have lost so many forces, and that you have been able to isolate a corridor. There are ideas of using UAS to lay—and they have been doing this—to lay minefields that canalize Russian forces so they cannot bring reinforcements. There are a lot of innovative ideas to create that depth for a breakthrough. There is not really a clear center of gravity that would achieve that, but it is kind of a—it is bringing all those efforts together to allow you to do that penetration.

For the quality of assault forces, I mean, Ukraine definitely puts a lot of emphasis into Ukraine specialized assault units for its army. You know, there is very much a quality factor there. While Russia might be retaining some quality forces, it is hard to imagine, with their attrition rate, that they have much quality left. These kinds of meat attacks just push forward very low-quality forces in high quantity. That makes it hard to see how Russia has some operational reserve of quality forces to achieve a breakthrough, or to counter a Ukrainian breakthrough.

Finally, for the air power question, I think that this is—you know, it is interesting to see. I am no air power expert. Just like the dominance that the U.S. has had over Iran, which has a pretty impressive air defense system, versus what Russia has been unable to achieve in Ukraine. I think a lot of that speaks to the just past Russian and Soviet emphasis on mostly air interdiction, assuming that NATO would have air superiority. It puts minimal focus on developing that ability for that kind of penetration of enemy air defense, and all the kinds of systems and electronic warfare capabilities and everything that goes along with that.

It really just lost that opportunity in the initial period of war, which, yes, I mean, was supposed to be very important to Russia, but they kind of screwed it up. [Laughs.] Ukraine, smartly, was able to conceal a lot of its systems and prevent those being lost in the initial period of war. It has been able to maintain an air defense system since then.

Mr. BARROS: Centers of gravity. For the Ukrainians, it is the international coalition supporting Ukraine, including the United States, including intelligence sharing. For the Russians, I spent a decent amount of time looking at this. I think at the operational level, we have to think about what the Russian operational concept is for how they maneuver. In 2025, the Russian military net-net, every day managed to seize about 15 square kilometers per day, at a cost of about a thousand casualties. The main tactics that the Russians use for advancing are small infantry groups of three to five guys, infiltration teams that try to needle their way through the kill zone, I think, dominated by the drones and all these field fortifications and stuff.

The guys that actually get to their forward operating bases that then disembark on this, “we are going to infiltrate through 20 kilometers of kill zone,” they actually have in the intermediate range zone—so in the distance of 25 kilometers to about 120 kilometers—they have all this elaborate operational infrastructure. They have logistics depots. They have the staging areas. They have the training ground; they are prepositioned in occupied Ukraine in the rear. Really, what is interesting is that the Ukrainians dominate the drone game at the zero-to-25-kilometer zone. The Ukrainians also have a growing long-range strike capacity, which is taking out the oil and gas infrastructure hundreds of kilometers away.

In this zone that used to be serviced by HIMARS, American-provided rocket artillery, but is now much less effective, the Russians have actually settled into this relative, really, comfort zone, where they are building all this machinery to push those infantrymen forward. I think actually a key part of the Russian center of gravity right now, is all this operational infrastructure in the 25-to-120-kilometer zone. We can talk more about that and what it takes to take that stuff out.

In terms of how to recognize culmination points, look, for the Russians; it is “when do they stop using vehicles?” We at ISW called the beginning of the Russian spring/summer 2026 offensive because we saw for the first time in a long time a battalion-sized attack, which included BMPs and things like that. That was the beginning of it. When do they stop using motorcycles? When do they stop using ATVs and buggies? When do the salvos of artillery decrease? When did the frequency of these attacks decrease? Because the Russian rate of performance is so lackluster and the size of their movements so small and dispersed, it is oftentimes hard to see these things. Those are the indicators that we look for when we try to study tactical culminations or operational culminations.

On the use of air power, it has been very interesting to see how little thought has been put into Ukrainian air domain operations. We debated for a long time about whether or not to give Ukraine F-16s. We denied Poland sending their MiGs for a long time. One of the critical failures of the 2023 counteroffensive was the assumption that the Ukrainians could penetrate Russian prepared defenses in depth without an air domain. I mean, there was no effort put into an air Ukrainian air attack in that place. I think it is very important. The Ukrainians need to be able to actually use glide bombs the same way that the Russians do, which presupposes a requirement to do suppression and destruction of Russian air defenses, which the Ukrainians are doing with drones. Those will get Ukrainian fixed-wing aircraft back into the game to then lob glide bombs to take out this intermediate range stuff.

This is a combined arms problem set that we have only now, in the fourth year of war, because we have been debating all the prerequisite equipment and kit and whether to or to not send them, that we can finally grapple with the combined arms aspect of it.

As I see it, this war is not hopelessly stalemated. It is not undynamic. It is actually still a competitive war. Some of these operational concepts are maturing. That, if provided the materiel to achieve the effects at scale, it is not impossible that the Ukrainians actually decrease the Russian rate of advance from 15 square kilometers a day to zero, and then, as they have done in the south, regain some ground.

Thank you.

Mr. PARKER: Thank you all. We are at time and adjourned.

Mr. O'KELLEY: Thank you to all our panelists. I think we did go overtime, but I think that speaks to the importance of the issue.

Thank you. [Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 3:12 p.m., the briefing ended.]





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