As the war continues with no end in sight, the leaders of states in the Coalition of the Willing discuss security guarantees for Ukraine

UK Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation in Ukraine as of August 29.

As the latest British Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation in Ukraine indicated was the case in late August, last week the Russian forces continued to attack the Ukrainian forces at a number of locations in Ukraine, extending from the city and region of Sumy just south of Sudzha in the Russian region of Kursk to the area along the border north of Kharkiv, the area east of Kupiansk and Izium, the area around the small city of Chasiv Yar, which the Russians claim to have taken; the area around Pokrovsk; and the area along the border of Kherson region and the Dnipro River in southeastern Ukraine. But as the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces reported in its daily updates, the Russian forces also continued to attack the Ukrainian forces defending a number of other cities and towns in eastern Ukraine, including Lyman about 30 kilometers southeast of Izium; Kramatorsk about 25 kilometers northwest of Chasiv Yar; Toretsk about 20 kilometers south of Chasiv Yar; Vremivka, about 50 kilometers south of Pokrovsk; as well as those in the Orikhiv area southeast of Zaporizhzhia and the area in Kherson region adjacent to the Dnipro River.

The General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces reported that over the seven days last week the Russian forces conducted a total of 1,193 attacks against the Ukrainian forces defending the cities and towns in northeastern, eastern, and southeastern Ukraine. As in previous weeks, the largest number of Russian attacks were directed against the Ukrainian forces defending Pokrovsk, a transit hub on the highway linking the city of Donetsk to Dnipro that, if taken, would open a pathway northward toward

Kostyantynivka, Kramatorsk, Sloviansk, and the western portion of Donetsk region that is still under Ukrainian control. Over the seven days last week, from last Sunday through Saturday, the Russian forces conducted a total of 355 attacks, more than one-quarter of all of their attacks last week, against the forces defending Pokrovsk, roughly the same number they have conducted each week for the past several months.

When one compares the weekly British maps of the battlefield situation in eastern Ukraine, it's often quite difficult to observe any significant change in the contact line from one week to the next. But the latest Defence Intelligence map, above, when compared with earlier ones, suggests the Russian forces have advanced a bit toward Pokrovsk from the east and south and have also taken some territory just north of the city. That is of course not surprising since, judging by the number of attacks conducted each day by the Russian forces toward particular cities in eastern Ukraine, Pokrovsk has been, and continues to be, by far the most frequent target of the Russian attacks in eastern Ukraine. It has been the most frequent target of those attacks for an obvious reason. It is not only an important transit hub on the highway that connects Donetsk city with Dnipro to the west but also one that, if taken, would open a pathway northward for the Russian forces toward the western portion of Donetsk region which, if taken, would pretty much complete Russia's control of that region and, with the region of Luhansk, its control of the Donbas.

Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, reported on Facebook that the Ukrainian forces had lost five square kilometers on the Pokrovsk front in August but were able to regain control of 26 square kilometers: "I worked in active combat zones on the Pokrovsk, Dobropillia and Siversk fronts, carrying out tasks at the command posts of units engaged in operations in these frontline areas. The Pokrovsk front remains one of the most challenging. Our units have repelled about 350 enemy attacks over the past week. It is here that the Russians have concentrated their main efforts and created the largest offensive group, which is trying to break through our defenses. Ukrainian soldiers are holding their positions, wiping out enemy personnel and equipment and conducting effective assault operations. Although the defense forces lost five square kilometers on the Pokrovsk front in August, they regained control of 26 square kilometers of Ukrainian territory. A similar ratio in our favor is also being observed on the Dobropillia front." Dobropillia is about 25 kilometers north of Pokrovsk.

There can be little doubt that the highest priority for the Russian forces at this point in the war is to take control of all of Donetsk region along with the very small portion of Luhansk region still held by the Ukrainian forces. In 2022, Russia formally annexed the two regions along with the regions of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, as it had annexed Crimea in 2014, and incorporated them into the Russian Federation. If and when Russia completes its takeover of the two regions that comprise the Donbas, it probably will be prepared to agree to a ceasefire. But until then, Russia is likely to continue to attack the Ukrainian forces defending Pokrovsk and the other cities and towns in eastern Ukraine.

While the Russian forces continue to attack the Ukrainian forces defending Pokrovsk and the other cities in eastern Ukraine, Russia also continues to attack the cities, towns, and people of Ukraine with hundreds of drones and missiles every night. On Saturday night and early Sunday, for example, Russia fired 805 drones, 9 cruise missiles and 4 ballistic missiles at Kyiv and other cities in Ukraine, destroying apartment buildings, hospitals, schools, and other public facilities, and killing a number of people, including children. There have been a number of very large Russian drone and missile attacks on Kyiv and other cities and towns over the past two months that have destroyed apartment buildings, hospitals, schools, and other public facilities and have killed many Ukrainians. But the Saturday-Sunday attack was the largest thus far and was notable not only for the scale of destruction but also because it badly damaged the building in which the offices of Ukraine's Council of Ministers are located.

While the war continued both on the ground and in the air with no sign of an imminent ceasefire, the leaders of the states participating in the Coalition of the Willing met in Paris Thursday, either in person or virtually, to continue their discussion of how best to guarantee Ukraine's security if and when there is a ceasefire. The Coalition came into being in March after British Prime Minister Starmer and French President Macron hosted a summit meeting of European and other leaders and officials at a time when there was some hope that there might soon be a ceasefire in order to ensure that the Russians would be unable to take advantage militarily of a ceasefire by advancing further into Ukraine. In a series of meetings of the leaders and defense ministers of the participating governments since then, the Coalition developed plans to ensure Ukraine's security once there is a ceasefire through the deployment of a "reassurance force" that could be deployed in Ukraine to protect it from any sudden resumption of the war by the Russian forces.

After several meetings, including meetings of defense officials, the leaders of the states participating in the Coalition agreed to meet again, in person or virtually, last Thursday in Paris. Last Monday, after meeting with NATO Secretary General Rutte, Macron said, "I just spoke with the NATO Secretary General to prepare the meeting of the Coalition of the Willing, which will take place this Thursday [Sept. 4] in Paris. Together with our partners, and in coordination with NATO, we will work to define robust security guarantees for Ukraine…. We will also review Russia's stance, as it persists in its war of aggression and continues to reject peace. Unity and determination in our support for Ukraine, and an unwavering will for peace." According to the French presidency, which coordinated the meeting, the leaders would "discuss work on security guarantees for Ukraine carried out in recent weeks and take stock of the consequences to be drawn from Russia's attitude, which stubbornly refuses peace." Separately, a spokesperson for French defense minister Lecornu said the defense ministers of the Coalition members would meet on Wednesday to discuss military support for Ukraine prior to the Thursday meeting.

About 30 leaders attended last Thursday's meeting either in person or virtually, including in addition to Macron and President Zelenskyy, Starmer, Rutte, German Chancellor Merz, and European Commission President von der Leyen. Trump didn't attend but spoke with the leaders by telephone after the meeting and his envoy, Steve Witkoff, who has met with Putin several times in Russia and probably knows better than anyone else the precise conditions under which Russia would cease its fire, did attend the meeting. The U.S. reportedly will not send troops to participate in the reassurance force after a ceasefire but will provide intelligence and other forms of support.

Following the meeting, at a joint press conference with Zelenskyy, Macron said 26 countries had agreed to contribute to Ukraine's security after any ceasefire or peace agreement: "We have today 26 countries who have formally committed – some others have not yet taken a position – to deploy as a 'reassurance force' troops in Ukraine, or be present on the ground, in the sea, or in the air." Starmer, for his part, issued a statement discussing the latest military planning for the Coalition and emphasized that the group had "an unbreakable pledge to Ukraine, with President Trump's backing" and that it had become clear they now need to go even further in applying pressure on Putin to end the war. Starmer also welcomed the announcements from the Coalition partners that have agreed to provide long-range missiles to Ukraine to strengthen its defense.

Russia has made it clear that it will not agree to Ukraine becoming a member of NATO, and Ukraine obviously won't have the same degree of security it would have if it were a member of NATO. But it will at least have the commitment of the 26 states in the Coalition of the Willing to participate in the provision and deployment of a "reassurance force" that will assure its security after a ceasefire.

In the meantime, the war continues with no end in sight.

David R. Cameron
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