As Russia's war continues on the ground and in the air, NATO responds to drone incursion with Eastern Sentry

UK Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation in Ukraine as of September 12.

As Friday's British Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation in Ukraine indicates, last week the Russian forces continued to attack the Ukrainian forces at a number of locations in Ukraine, extending from the area south of Sudzha in the Russian region of Kursk toward the Ukrainian city of Sumy 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, the city of Pokrovsk and the area around it, and the area in Kherson region adjacent to 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 and Kramatorsk in the area between Izium and Chasiv Yar, Toretsk between Chasiv Yar and Pokrovsk, and the Orikhiv area in Zaporizhzhia region.

The General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces reported that over the seven days last week the Russian forces conducted a total of 1,244 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 that, if taken, would open a pathway not only to the western portion of Donetsk region but also a pathway northward to the cities of Kostyantynivka, Kramatorsk, and Sloviansk in that region that are still held by Ukraine. Over the seven days last week, the Russian forces conducted a total of 359 attacks against the forces defending Pokrovsk and the area around it, and last week it

was, as it has been for the past several months, the most frequently attacked city in eastern Ukraine.

That Pokrovsk has been for some time the most frequent target of the Russian attacks in eastern Ukraine reflects the fact that at this point in the war the highest priority for the Russian forces is to take control of all of Donetsk region along with the very small portion of Luhansk region still held by the Ukrainian forces. If and when Russia completes its takeover of those two regions, it probably will be prepared to agree to a ceasefire with the assumption that it will retain the Donbas in any peace agreement. But until it completes its takeover of the Donbas, Russia is likely to continue its attacks against 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 drones and missiles every night. On the night of Sept. 6-7, for example, Russia fired 810 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 that 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.

Last Wednesday, the Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russia had fired 415 drones, 42 cruise missiles, and one ballistic missile at a number of targets in Ukraine and that at least eight of the drones had crossed the Ukraine border in the direction of Poland. Polish Prime Minister Tusk subsequently reported that 19 drones had entered Polish air space and that, as a result, Poland had formally invoked Article 4 of the NATO Treaty, which states that the members will consult together whenever, in the opinion of any member, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any member is threatened.

The North Atlantic Council met that day in response to Poland's request and discussed the situation. Following the meeting, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte said, "The North Atlantic Council met this morning and discussed the situation in light of Poland's request for consultations under Article 4 of the Washington Treaty. Allies expressed solidarity with Poland and denounced Russia's reckless behavior. A full assessment of the incident is ongoing. What is clear is that the violation last night is not an isolated incident…. The Supreme Allied Commander will continue to actively manage our deterrence and defense posture along the entire eastern flank. Allies are resolved to defend every inch of Allied territory. We will closely monitor the situation along our eastern flank, our air defenses continually at the ready…. Russia is waging a dangerous

war of aggression against Ukraine that continually targets civilians and civilian infrastructure. Allies are determined to step up their support for Ukraine in the face of Russia's escalating campaign."

On Friday, Rutte announced that NATO had launched an initiative, Eastern Sentry, to reinforce the ability of its eastern European members to defend themselves against attacks. Calling Russia's drone incursion into Poland on Wednesday "dangerous and unacceptable," he said, "Russia's recklessness in the air, along our eastern flank, is increasing in frequency. Eastern Sentry will add flexibility and strength to our posture and make clear that, as a defensive alliance, we are always ready to defend." According to a press release, Eastern Sentry will have available to it two F-16 fighters and an anti-air warfare frigate from Denmark, three Rafale jets from France, and four Eurofighters from Germany. NATO also made it clear that, while it is a response to the violation of Polish airspace, Eastern Sentry will not be limited to responding to future violations of air space over Poland. Indeed, U.S. Gen. Alexus Grynkewich, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, said, "Although the immediacy of our focus is on Poland, this situation transcends the border of one nation. What affects one ally affects us all."

In the meantime, Ukraine responded to Russia's continuing missile and drone attacks last week with its own drone attacks against Russia. On Thursday night into Friday morning, Ukraine fired 221 drones at a number of targets in Russia, including its largest oil terminal, in Primorsk about 130 kilometers northwest of St. Petersburg. The Primorsk terminal is the last station in Russia's Baltic Pipeline System and an important supply point for those who continue to support Russia's war by purchasing its oil. And on Saturday night, Ukraine attacked with drones Russia's oil refinery in Kirishi, about 100 kilometers southeast of St. Petersburg. It is Russia's third largest refinery.

And so the war continues, both on the ground and in the air, and with no end in sight.

David R. Cameron
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