As the war continues, Ukrainians protest dismissal of Defence Minister & retention of Commander-in-Chief of Armed Forces

Last Monday's British Defence Intelligence update on the battlefield situation in Ukraine.

As last Monday's British Defence Intelligence map of the battlefield situation in Ukraine indicated, the Russian forces continued last week, as they had in recent weeks, to attack toward Sumy in northeastern Ukraine and at a number of points along the contact line between the forces in eastern and southeastern Ukraine from Kupiansk and the area south of that city to Kostyantynivka and toward the cities of Druzhkivka, Kramatorsk and Sloviansk northwest of that city, the area between Pokrovsk and Dobropillia, and the area in Kherson region near its junction with Dnipropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia regions. And while the Russians continued to attack at those and other points along the long contact line between the forces, the Ukrainian forces continued to attack in the southeastern corner of Dnipropetrovsk region just north of Dobropillia. Both sides also continued to attack at a number of other locations along the contact line.

In comments to a journalist last week, President Putin said the Russian forces were only 10 kilometers from the city of Sumy and 3 to 5 kilometers from the city of Kupiansk, had taken nearly all of the city of Lyman, were "advancing at a good pace" toward Sloviansk, and held 96 percent of the city of Kostyantynivka. He also said the Russian forces were advancing in Zaporizhzhia region by about a kilometer a day and were advancing toward the city of Orikhiv in that region as well. He said Ukraine had proposed a mutual halt to long-range air strikes as a step toward peace and said Russia thought the proposal was motivated by Ukraine's desire to strengthen its ground forces along the long frontline in eastern Ukraine: "It is clear why this proposal is being made, because our counterstrikes deep into Ukrainian territory are much stronger, have greater impact and are, frankly, more destructive. Given their catastrophic shortage of personnel, the Ukrainian Armed Forces apparently believe this [ending the air war] could be their salvation. But saving the Kyiv regime is not part of our plans."

In the interview, Putin downplayed the impact of the recent Ukrainian drone attacks on Russian refineries and fuel storage facilities, claiming they were “aimed at diverting our attention and forces from achieving the main objectives – the complete liberation of Donbas and Novorossiya.” The former of course refers to the easternmost regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. The latter term, which originally was used to refer to territory in the Russian Empire that had been taken from the Ottoman Empire, was first used by Putin in April 2014 to legitimize Russia’s support for the pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas, saying those two regions, along with those of Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Odesa, were part of Novorossiya. If, as Putin said, Russia’s “main objectives” are in fact “the complete liberation of Donbas and Novorossiya” that implies “liberating” a substantial portion – roughly the eastern third – of Ukraine, including, in addition to the two regions of the Donbas, the regions of Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Odesa.

On July 4, Presidents Trump and Putin spoke by telephone for 85 minutes. According to the commentary on the conversation by Russian presidential aide Yury Ushakov posted on Putin's presidential site, the conversation "was not only formal but also business-like and constructive," the presidents discussed current bilateral and international issues, and they talked about a Ukrainian settlement, including in light of Trump's upcoming participation in the NATO summit in Ankara on July 7 and 8. The commentary said Trump had "reaffirmed his readiness to facilitate an early termination of the hostilities and the search for peaceful solutions to the crisis" and had said his special envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner "will carry on their mediation efforts and are ready to come to Moscow at our convenience." Ushakov said Putin had "reaffirmed our commitment to a political and diplomatic settlement of the conflict, with due consideration for Russia's known principled approaches." Also on July 4, President Zelenskyy said he too had a "very good call" with President Trump: "There is,” he said, “a real prospect to put an end to this war, and America's resolve is decisive."

But in the meantime, the war on the ground continues, as does Russia’s war in the air, with its nightly barrage of drones, glide bombs, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles, including its new intermediate-range hypersonic Oreshnik ballistic missile which reaches a speed of Mach 10 (over 7500 miles per hour) and is, for that reason, exceptionally difficult to hit with defensive weapons. According to the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, since the war began in February 2022 through June of this year 16,431 Ukrainian civilians, including 803 children, have been killed and 48,613, including 2,960 children, have been injured in the Russian drone and missile attacks which hit apartment buildings and homes as well as the facilities that provide electricity, water and gas for the residents of Kyiv and the other cities of Ukraine. For example, on the night of July 1 and the following early morning Russia fired 74 missiles and 496 drones that hit in 30 locations in Kyiv, including 20 apartment buildings, and killed 21 civilians and injured 85. It was, Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko said, “a terrible night for Kyiv. The enemy’s most massive attack.” Last Saturday night and early Sunday morning, Ukraine experienced another massive ballistic missile and drone attack in which, President

Zelenskyy said, Kyiv and other cities were hit by more than 40 Iskander-M ballistic missiles and 120 attack drones.

Zelenskyy has made it very clear for some time, both privately and publicly, that Ukraine desperately needs more interceptor missiles for the Patriot air defense systems it now has and, toward that end, he has asked the U.S. to grant Ukraine a license to produce more interceptor missiles. Prior to his meeting with Zelenskyy on the sidelines of the recent NATO summit in Ankara, Trump told him, “One of the things we’re going to be talking about is, we’re going to give a license to you to make Patriots.” He later said, “I think they can produce them very quickly once we explain it.” He also said he hadn’t told Lockheed Martin and Raytheon, the manufacturers of the Patriot system, about his decision yet, “but that’ll work out alright.”

As Ukraine’s recent successes with drone and missile strikes against Russian targets indicate, it has a highly skilled defense sector. But it will obviously take some time for Ukraine to organize production of the Patriot missiles and Russia will no doubt attempt to find out where they’ll be produced, and when they do they’ll no doubt target the facilities. It obviously would have been more helpful, not only for the U.S. firms but, most importantly, for Ukraine, if the U.S. had simply agreed to provide Ukraine with the additional interceptor missiles it needs, rather than give it a license to produce them – especially since, even with a relatively advanced drone and missile sector, it may take some time for Ukraine to organize production of the missiles – assuming, of course, it will be able to protect the plant or plants in which the missiles will be produced from Russian attacks. And it will no doubt take some time for Ukraine to produce the considerable number of interceptor missiles it will need in light of the large number of drones and missiles Russia launches each night. The maximum number of interceptor missiles that can now be produced by the U.S. firms is reportedly 600 per year – roughly a dozen a week – which means Ukraine may not for some time have enough missiles available to intercept the large number of missiles that Russia fires each night. Trump’s decision to give Ukraine a license to produce interceptor missiles, rather than giving Ukraine missiles made by the U.S. firms, including missiles that could be used immediately, in effect adds a substantial delay in the time when Ukraine will have interceptor missiles available for use compared with when it would have them available for use if the U.S. simply provided Ukraine with some of the missiles it currently has on hand.

Two weeks ago, after a meeting with a number of government ministers and other officials to discuss the supply of fuel to car owners, businesses, enterprises, and other significant organizations in light of Ukraine’s continuing attacks on fuel storage facilities, Putin was asked by a journalist about a comment he made at an international economic forum in St. Petersburg a week earlier that, while there had not been any talks with or about Ukraine recently, contacts continued through other channels. He was asked if those contacts were ongoing and whether there had been any new proposals put forward in regard to Ukraine. He said, “Yes, contacts do continue. They have been established through several channels and along several lines. There is no secret about that. There have also been new proposals. The suggestion of a meeting with the head of the Kiev regime is common knowledge.

The request for at least a temporary ceasefire along the line of contact is no news either. There have, however, been some new proposals, and I am prepared to mention a few of them. One is that both sides should stop carrying out long-range strikes deep inside each other's territory. The reason for this proposal is obvious. Our retaliatory strikes deep inside Ukrainian territory are far more powerful, more effective and, frankly, more destructive, resulting in genuinely serious consequence for the Kiev regime."

When asked whether there were any contacts between the two governments, Putin said, "Yes, contacts do continue. They have been established through several channels and along several lines. There is no secret about that. There have also been new proposals. The suggestion of a meeting with the head of the Kiev regime is common knowledge. The request for at least a temporary ceasefire along the line of contact is no news either. There have, however, been some new proposals, and I am prepared to mention a few of them. One is that both sides should stop carrying out long-range strikes deep inside each other's territory. The reason for this proposal is obvious. Our retaliatory strikes deep inside Ukrainian territory are far more powerful, more effective and, frankly, more destructive, resulting in genuinely serious consequences for the Kiev regime. Another proposal is to limit military operations – please note this carefully – to just four territories: the Kherson and Zaporozhye regions and the Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics, while halting hostilities everywhere else."

He said Ukraine had proposed an agreement with Russia to end their long-range drone and missile attacks on each other as a step toward peace. But he said he had rejected it as an effort to relieve the Russian pressure on the Ukrainian forces along the contact line between the forces in eastern Ukraine: "It is clear why this proposal is being made, because our counter-strikes deep into Ukrainian territory are much stronger, have greater impact, and are, frankly, more destructive. Given their catastrophic shortage of personnel, the Ukrainian Armed Forces apparently believe this could be their salvation. But saving the Kyiv regime is not part of our plans." He did acknowledge, however, that the Ukrainian drone attacks on gas and oil facilities and storage areas had led to fuel shortages in some Russian regions.

Putin also made it clear in comments in a television interview that Russia aims to take all of the territory in the four Ukrainian regions – Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia – it formally annexed in September 2022. He also made it clear that, as U.S. Secretary of State Rubio said about the Trump-Putin talks in Anchorage last year, there had been no formal agreement in regard to territory: "Nobody signed anything," he said. "But we talked about certain possibilities for ending the conflict in Ukraine." He also told the interviewer that Russia expects a resumption of the U.S.-led diplomatic effort to end the war and another visit to Moscow by the American presidential envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner once the "hot phase" of the U.S.-Israel war with Iran ends.

On July 7-8, the leaders of the member states of NATO met in Ankara. They were joined by President Zelenskyy and the war in Ukraine obviously figured prominently in their discussions. The European and Canadian leaders signaled their

willingness to participate in funding Ukraine's continuing fight against Russia and the summit's declaration stated, "For 2026, Allies pledge €70 billion in military equipment, assistance and training for Ukraine and affirm their sovereign commitments to sustaining at least equivalent levels in 2027. To this end, we welcome the European Union's decision to provide multi-year funding to Ukraine through the Ukraine Support Loan." In April, the EU approved a €90 billion loan to Ukraine to cover two-thirds of its financial needs in 2026 and 2027. The NATO pledge includes €30 billion each year from the EU loan as well as funds committed by individual member states.

As Russia's war against Ukraine continued in the air and on the ground, Ukraine experienced some unsettling domestic politics that began with the resignation of Prime Minister Yulia Svyrydenko on July 14 after having served in the office for a year. Her resignation was announced by President Zelenksyy, who said Ukraine is "changing its political strategy" although he didn't say what the new strategy is or will be. He subsequently nominated Serhii Koretskyi, the chief executive of Naftogaz, Ukraine's state-owned gas company, to succeed her as Prime Minister and his appointment was confirmed by the Rada last Thursday.

But as important as that appointment is, perhaps the most important political news last week was the surprising – and for many, disturbing – news last Wednesday that Mykhailo Fedorov had been dismissed from his position as Defense Minister. Zelenskyy cited the apparent behind-the-scenes friction between Fedorov and Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and indeed, in a news conference following his dismissal, Fedorov accused Syrskyi of blocking the reforms that he believed were needed in order to take full advantage of the continuing developments in drone technology and other types of military equipment. (Prior to becoming defense minister, Fedorov had been responsible for overseeing and promoting the development of drone technology.) Indeed, Fedorov went so far as to say that "under this arrangement [with Syrskyi as Commander-in-Chief] I personally do not know how the war can be won."

It's quite possible that Syrskyi insisted that Fedorov be replaced. But whether he did or not, Zelenskyy dismissed Fedorov from his position last Wednesday and subsequently asked Gen. Yevhenii Khmara, the acting head of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), to take over as Acting Minister of Defense, pending his confirmation by the Rada. Fedorov's criticism of Syrskyi clearly resonated with many Ukrainians – especially younger Ukrainians – who perhaps attribute the high numbers of Ukrainian casualties in the battles for Bakhmut and other cities in the Donbas to Syrskyi's leadership of the Armed Forces. Despite the fact that Fedorov has been replaced and Syrskyi continues to be Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, the protests continue – both those expressing support for Fedorov and those expressing opposition to Syrskyi. And as they do, so too the war goes on – and does so with no end in sight.

David R. Cameron
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