Prospects for the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

An Overview

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Introduction

Much has been written about the ongoing Russia-Ukraine military conflict and there seems little hope of it ending anytime soon. The authors wish to provide a brief review of the historical roots of this conflict, its status, and what might transpire in terms of Russian, US, Ukrainian, and NATO policies going forward. Our collective experience in the various parts of the National Security arena shows us that unexpected events and changes in leadership can bring surprising changes in the situation. None of us has a crystal ball, but we all should hope and work towards an end to the human slaughter and environmental destruction and not be surprised at how events unfold. We hope you will find this summary informative and helpful.

Russian Nationalism and the Roots of Conflict

The current Russia-Ukraine conflict is an outgrowth of long-standing Russian attitudes toward Ukraine and changing geopolitical events. Russia grew out of the principality of Muscovy, a part of the medieval Kingdom of Rus centered in Kiev. But, Ukraine was always viewed by most Russians as second class to Mother Russia. Indeed, the very name Ukraine in Russian denotes a land on the edge of Russia which exists only to support and help protect Mother Russia.

President Putin is a popular KGB-trained Russian nationalist who does not trust the US, and is a sly, manipulating autocrat (*the Trump administration has its hands full trying to deal with him*). He continues to grate under the fact that the USSR "lost" the Cold War to the USA and lost its super power status to become a weaker country struggling to find its place in the 21st Century. In the 1990's under Yeltsin, Russia toyed with democracy and capitalism, but Russian leaders soon felt that the US was trying to inhibit Russian development and desire to regain "Great Russian" status. The majority of Russians do not trust the West. Consequently, the rise of Russian nationalism under Putin's authoritarian leadership, similar to the rise of German nationalism under Hitler in the 1930s, has met with acceptance and support among the general Russian population which has historically sought strong leaders against the outside world. Time and time again Mother Russia has been attacked from both the West and East.

Noteworthy in Russian history was the 18th century Tsarina, Catherine the Great, who wrested the Crimea from the Ottoman Empire. Under the Soviets in the mid-1950s, the Crimea was transferred to the Ukrainian Republic for administrative reasons. This had unintended future consequences. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and Ukraine became independent, Russia lost all of its major warm water ports on the Black Sea and most of its capacity for maritime exports and imports. It also meant that the "land bridge," the dense rail network required to transport industrial and agricultural products to the ports, was in the hands of Ukraine. Russia had to pay fees to Ukraine to operate its Crimean port at Sevastopol and to maintain its Black Sea Naval Fleet until it invaded and annexed the Crimea in 2014.

Finally, NATO now surrounds Russia militarily to the West and South. Should Ukraine join NATO, it would virtually land lock Russia's industrial and agricultural heartland west of the Urals. President Putin has demanded that the West respect Russia's security needs, withdraw forces from Russia's borders and grant Russia latitude in dealing with the countries in its "near abroad," those territories adjacent to Russia which were formerly part of the USSR's sphere of influence.

President Putin believes that US leaders, both Presidents HW Bush and Clinton, promised Yeltsin that the US would not encourage the eastward expansion of NATO. What neither side seems to have anticipated following the breakup of the USSR was that the former Soviet republics along Russia's western border, which were now independent countries, would flee into NATO's arms for protection after decades of Russian domination. As the "victors" in the Cold War, US leaders did not resist this expansion of NATO despite US and European efforts to meet Russian security concerns, such as establishing the NATO-Russia Council. They were also overly optimistic regarding how post-Soviet Russia would develop thinking that it would become a positive player in the international arena and posed no threat to its neighbors.

The Military Status Quo

The latest ISW map (Figure 1a) and the rail map (Figure 1b) shows generally where the front lines are today in Russian occupied Ukraine, about 20% of the country. East of the heavy black line (Figure 1b) lies Russian held territory with Ukrainian forces to the west. Heavy fighting is currently in progress near Pokrovsk (1), a strategic logistics hub and one of Ukraine's most heavily defended areas. Russian forces are gaining ground there and extending their control of Donetsk and the "land bridge." In earlier fighting, they were contained and did not capture Odesa (2) or several major ports near it. But they do control all of the lesser ports on the Sea of Azov (3) and the rail networks that service them.

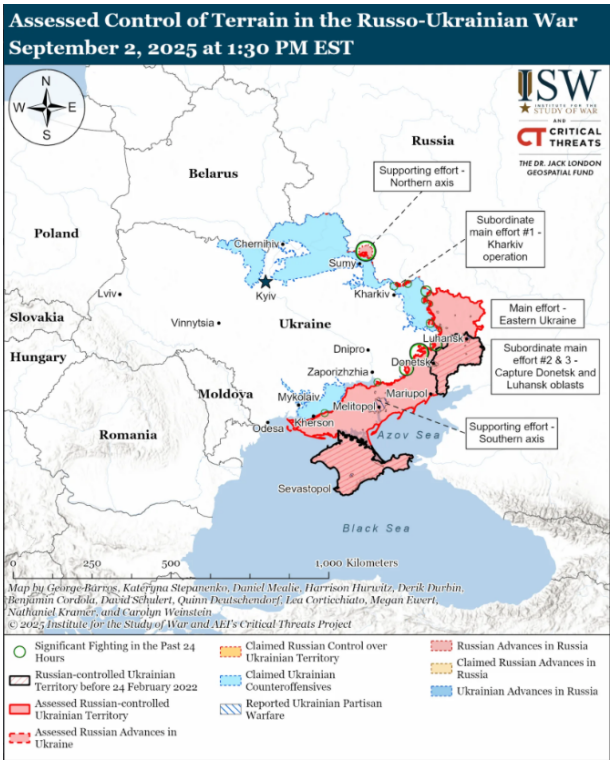

Figure 1. a) (Left) ISW Ukraine Update, b) (right) Ukraine railways

Military Constraints and Advantages on Both Sides

Ukraine faces significant manpower constraints. Ukrainian losses during the first years of the war were significantly less than Russian losses but Ukraine has a far smaller population. Since 2023, Ukraine has been unable to bring its forces up to the level that would allow a breakthrough of Russian defenses and has been on the defensive. Ukraine could lower its draft age, which has been set at 27 to protect the younger population, but has chosen not to do so. Ukrainian units are kept on the line without relief for long periods of time.

Ukraine is dependent on weaponry provided by Western nations. However grateful it is for their support, it comes with complications. The Ukrainian military entered the war equipped primarily with old Soviet manufactured arms. NATO equipment is incompatible with Soviet equipment. Soviet-made ammunition and replacement parts are increasingly difficult to acquire and training for new NATO systems takes months or years. Particularly important is the fact that former Soviet satellite countries like Poland have transferred all the legacy material they have and Western attempts to buy Soviet manufactured ammunition on the international market has exhausted legacy sources. The inventory of NATO compatible material is slowly growing, but Ukrainian artillery crews, for example, complain that they sometimes have only a dozen or so rounds to reply to hundreds of incoming rounds from Russian artillery.

Another reality of Western support is that some categories of weaponry are simply not available. Western forces hollowed out following the collapse of the USSR and governments simply shrank their militaries. Much equipment is old or has been mothballed. One figure that comes to mind is that Germany had more than 2,500 battle tanks in 1991 when the USSR collapsed. In 2024, they had 296. This lay behind the delay in transferring Leopard I tanks that had to be pulled out of mothballs and refurbished. Similar stories lie behind other NATO deliveries.

In addition to the problems of acquiring military material, weapons often come with restrictions on the rules of engagement. For most of the war, Western providers did not want their systems used against targets outside of Ukrainian territory for fear of Russian nuclear escalation. These fears have eased in the last year as experience showed that escalation was unlikely. Providers increasingly allow longer range strikes to interdict the safe havens used by Russia to mass men and munitions.

Another Ukrainian constraint arises from the constant bombardment and widespread damage caused by Russian attacks against its civilian industrial, power, transportation and housing facilities. Despite the fact that Ukraine was an industrial, technical, and aerospace powerhouse before independence, there are no safe areas where it can concentrate effective manufacturing and weapons maintenance, and marshal military/industrial talent on any scale that is not subject to attack. An exception is drone manufacturing which is a cottage industry.

Ukraine's imaginative use of drones has changed modern warfare and devalued the Russian advantage in armored and naval forces. The 2023 Battle of Bakhmut was the bloodiest siege in Europe since World War II. Drones reportedly accounted for 90% of Russian equipment losses. Drones also sank the Flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, the Moskva. Subsequent drone damage to warships caused the Fleet to be withdrawn from Sevastopol and anchored out of

drone range.

Most of Ukraine's drones are imported commercial products adapted to carry military payloads by using 3D printers to fashion mounts. Ukraine expects to produce some 4 million such drones next year, and the proliferation of manufacturing sites makes Russian targeting of them impossible.

Russia suffered heavy manpower losses early in the war and was forced to enact a 300,000-man draft and to borrow troops from North Korea. The draft was sufficiently unpopular that President Putin has avoided another one. Instead, the military is now offering huge salaries — two and a half times the average wage earner's pay. The plan is working, has alleviated manpower shortages at the front and has allowed new offensives against Ukraine.

Russia enjoys the advantage of position. Its army is deployed with its rear against the Sea of Azov and its forward area protected by an impregnable line of defenses. The 2023 Ukrainian offensive attempted to penetrate those defenses in three areas, north towards Donetsk, south through Kherson and in the middle towards the port of Mariupol. Success would have stranded the entire Russian Army. But Ukraine could not breakthrough and is unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future given its manpower constraints.

Russia has resurrected mothballed weapons plants and is producing equipment at a growing pace. One noteworthy success is the endless artillery ammunition available to Russian forces. Another is the production of drones, some of which are capable of deep strikes. Increasingly, attacks against Ukrainian targets mix drones with long range missiles to saturate Ukrainian defenses.

Sanctions against Russia have made arms manufacturing more difficult as components are hard to acquire. China has provided some components but has been loath to provide major weapon systems. There are also sanctions avoiders, like Turkey, that have allowed banned materials to reach Russia. Overall, Russian weapons plants appear to be providing sufficient armaments so that the military can function at a higher level of consumption than Ukraine.

The Russian shift to military/industrial production and enhanced recruiting has caused labor shortages in the economy. The Russian military is now 3% of the labor force and has doubled since 2020. Russian unemployment hit 2%, a dangerously low figure for an economy its size. The Central Bank began to sound alarms.

Views of Major Players Prior to Negotiations

Russia. Often mentioned in news reports is President Putin's demand that all territories annexed by Russia, even if his troops do not control them, be ceded to Russia. This applies especially to the Donbas regions of Luhansk and Donetsk, and the Crimea. We can assume his demands include the militarily occupied ports on the Sea of Azov and the "land bridge" leading to them. Thus far, President Zelenskyy has rejected these demands but as President Trump pointed out to him, he doesn't have the "cards" to regain that territory.

As it stands, the Russian invasion is an unfinished strategic enterprise and not merely a real estate deal. President Putin is attempting to reestablish the integrity of the former Russian Empire as well as its sphere of influence beyond its borders, and to ensure its security and

economic viability. To achieve that requires the major Black Sea ports like Odesa and expanded control of the "land bridge." His forces have made repeated but unsuccessful attempts to capture Odesa and are pushing hard at Pokrovsk. Acceding to his demand that Ukraine withdraw from Donetsk would cripple otherwise sturdy defenses in the middle of the Ukrainian line.

In addition to ports, Mr. Putin needs a new relationship with the US and Western Europe that respects Russian aspirations as a great power and is passive to Russian aggression intended to create a defensive perimeter. An integral part of his plan is to neuter the Ukraine and establish it as a vassal state on the order of Belorussia. By no means will he allow Ukraine to turn West if he can prevent it. He demands that Ukraine not join NATO with its Article 5 clause requiring all members to resist aggression against any member. He further demands that no western troops be stationed in Ukraine, the normal trip wire for a serious security guarantee.

Ukraine. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union the US put pressure on Ukraine's leaders to give up their strategic nuclear arsenal believing that the security guarantees of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which were underwritten by Russia, the US and the UK, would be sufficient protection for a non-nuclear Ukraine. It didn't work. In 2014, the Crimea was invaded and much of the Donbas (Luhansk and Donetsk) was captured by Russian troops posing as pro-Russian militias. None of the Budapest guarantors intervened. President. Zelensky demands stronger security guarantees for any settlement of the current hostilities.

Ukraine's' initial refusal to cede captured territory to Russia was moderated after the February meeting at the White House when President Trump told him that Ukraine did not have "the cards" to recapture Russian-held territory. At this point, Ukraine remains averse to ceding territory that Russia has not taken militarily but which President Putin is demanding, such as territories that Russia has illegally annexed – the rest of Luhansk and Donetsk. Ukrainians expect Russia to use a ceasefire to prepare for future conquest. For now, President Zalensky's demands have been somewhat general as he seeks to avoid confrontations with Western backers. As any negotiating agenda begins to take shape, he can be expected to harden his demands and make security a central issue.

United States. Washington's demands are in flux and are to be seen against two major political realities: voters will no longer support the notion that the US is the "world's policeman," and foreign aid is under heavy political pressure and is being reduced drastically. The stated goals of the Trump Administration are to (1) stop the killing, (2) achieve a secure future for Ukraine, and (3) reestablish normal economic and trade relations with Russia. US views have not been totally spelled out, are evolving, and have not been codified.

European Views. Because Europe is adjacent to the conflict, leaders fear escalation. After three decades of complacency following the collapse of the Soviet Union, during which time they dismissed the idea of another major war in Europe, they are now scrambling to reorient and rearm. Finland and Sweden joined NATO after long histories of neutrality, and European countries are deeply suspicious of Russia's expansionist ambitions. They seek to contain Russia, protect the viability of Ukraine, and end the destruction and atrocities of the war. They know, however, that they cannot be successful without the military power of the US.

Europe is exploring security options for Ukraine that range from buying and transferring weapons from the US to stationing European ground forces in Ukraine by a "coalition of the willing" to secure the post-war peace. Key European leaders accompanied President Zelensky to some of his meetings with President Trump as a show of solidarity.

Europe is extensively affected by sanctions against Russia, particularly energy sanctions. These have roiled their economies, cut off supply sources and shrunk their markets. All would like energy sanctions to cease.

Use and Effectiveness of Sanctions on Russia

To pressure Russia to negotiate a settlement, the most frequently mentioned lever is either easing current sanctions or imposing additional ones. The implicit assumption is that the Russian economy has been badly hurt by sanctions and that President Putin would cede diplomatic ground to escape them.

There are three types of sanctions: financial sector, oil and gas caps, and export controls. As a result of past sanctions, Russian GDP has declined by 10-12% compared to pre-invasion levels. Personal disposable income has declined 20-25% and inflation is running at over 20%. However, sanctions operate at the discretion of the participating countries and have the weakness of being fragmented and under resourced enforcement in the European Union. Nevertheless, Russia has been frozen out of western financial transactions, has lost virtually its entire crude oil market in Europe and is subjected to a troublesome if leaky ban on technical material.

Europe continues to be the largest buyer of Russian liquified natural gas (LNG) and takes 51% of its total exports. These shipments rose over 19% in 2024. Europeans prefer Russian LNG to the more expensive American or Gulf products which no longer can ship via the Red Sea and Suez Canal. Russian LNG imports continue, in part, because some 20% of them were for reexport to third countries. There is an enforcement problem, however, when LNG is mixed and moved in EU pipelines. No one can track the origin of 3-9% of the gas and it appears that EU countries are taking an increasing amount of this. Germany has supported a ban on these imports but is opposed by France, Spain and Belgium.

Because of sanctions and the move to a wartime economy, Russia has hit supply side constraints in labor, investment and capital. Direct expenditures on military/industrial activities consume 40% of the state budget. But still, Russian debt to GDP is less than 20% compared to the US ratio of 119.4%. Borrowing and deficit financing could support a war effort for at least several more years. Inflation and the cost of living would climb, but other countries have dealt with it. Inflation in Turkey was 85% in 2022 and Brazil was over 72% in l990. While some experts judge that the Russian economy will reach a tipping point this year, there is no expectation that Russian consumers, who endured privation under the Soviet Union and during the transition from Communism in the 1990's, would overthrow the government of one of the world's most advanced police states. Western sanctions and leverage, such as restricting military or economic aid, can also be used against Ukraine to force a settlement. Western leaders can also promise restoration funds to assist in recovery and rebuilding.

Changing the Negotiating Environment

There are some strategies that might be used to change the negotiating environment.

While Russia has used drones and missiles so heavily that there are few Ukrainian military targets left, Ukraine is only just getting started. Ukrainian drones have been ad hoc creations that are slow, easily detected and vulnerable. The large numbers and a few sophisticated models, however, have wreaked havoc on Russian forces. Ukraine is building improved models with greater range and effectiveness, and Western suppliers are supplying systems with longer ranges. Limited long-range strikes into Russia have focused on military targets and energy facilities. A short-lived moratorium on energy strikes was agreed to last March during President Trump's early efforts for a peace deal, but energy strikes have resumed.

Ukraine might expand this strategy and strike ever deeper into Russian territory bringing the war home to areas so far untouched. The locations of Russia's defense plants, for example, are well known, and would be hard to defend if Ukraine acquires the means to attack them. This strategy would touch a sensitive point with President Putin as it would test the "social contract" between his citizens and the state —"you stay out of politics and the state will protect you and improve your life". A deep strike campaign would likely bring threats of nuclear retaliation from Russia, the consequences of which might frighten Ukraine's sponsors and actually reduce outside support. Previous nuclear threats by Putin have proven to be bluffs, but they were intended to scare and intimidate the US and its allies and successfully slowed the delivery of long-range weapons to Ukraine.

Because Europe is still heavily dependent on Russian LNG, it gives Russia leverage. F acing an uncertain period of international trade realignment -- tariffs, a shrinking market in China, the realignment of supply chains, etc., European economies are unsettled. Russia could threaten to reduce the LNG available to Europe or to raise prices. This would effectively raise many costs in Europe which could not easily switch suppliers as US and Gulf LNG supplies are more expensive than Russia's. However, such a Russian strategy has downsides. Europe may be energized to greater support for Ukraine as retaliation. Moreover, Russian export reductions would also curtail critical earnings from a significant source of revenue needed to support Moscow's war effort.

Prospects for a Negotiated Settlement

A halt in the conflict between Russia and the Ukraine will unlikely come soon, and neither side seems to accept the status quo. President Putin is betting that the West will tire of supporting Ukraine and that time is on his side to pursue further battlefield gains. He has created a war economy and believes the arms buildup will eventually allow him to overcome his opponent. There is some evidence that he is right. Vice President Vance made clear in mid- August that the US is done funding Ukraine's defenses, although selling weapons paid for by Europeans would continue.

The kingpin in western efforts to negotiate is President Trump. He has dominated the pace and conduct of talks, whether with Russia, President Zelensky, or the NATO Allies. The other parties, even Russia, find themselves in a largely reactive mode, although President Putin remains the "elephant in the room" – all parties are striving to get him to the table.

The Alaska Meeting**.** Following the preliminary talks with President Putin by Steven Witkoff on August 6 in Moscow, who reported Putin's interest in land swaps in Ukraine, President Trump moved to postpone economic sanctions and to schedule the US-Russia summit in Alaska on August 15. President Putin was quick to accept.

President Trump entered the talks with his longstanding goal of a ceasefire and with openness to consider land-swaps that he would then take to Zelensky. President Putin came armed with his list of one-sided demands that he has long argued are necessary to get at the "root causes" of the conflict, that is, denazification of Ukraine (or in other words, regime change), demilitarization of Ukraine, no membership of Ukraine in NATO, and recognition of all Ukraine territories claimed by Russia, including those still held by Ukraine. The Alaska summit was cut short after three hours, featured a major concession by President Trump in dropping his demand for a cease fire and accepting President Putin's position that negotiations should move to talks for a peace agreement while the war continues. President Putin appears to have maneuvered the talks giving Russia another year or two to make further advances on the battlefield.

Evaluations of the Alaska summit in the West were largely negative. According to former US Ambassador to Ukraine Steve Pifer, President Zelensky and the Europeans need to "walk Trump back from a position that he does not appear to understand, would be bad for Ukraine, bad for Europe, and bad for American interests." Meanwhile, the Russian publication RT offered a sharp contrast: "The Alaska summit was a success. The challenge is to make it last. This is the moment when the US has to stick to a course of normalization with Russia no matter what the EU and Kiev want."

Washington**.** President Trump was right to initiate a follow-up meeting with President Zelensky in Washington on August 18. Major European leaders promptly invited themselves to Washington to join the summit and reset the course for dealing with Russia. The Europeans brought a uniform message of support for Ukraine, including agreement that expansive Russian claims to unconquered Ukrainian territory should not be recognized. They combined to present a common front to persuade President Trump that only a strong position in support of Kyiv would offer any hope for reaching a settlement with Moscow. Even then the chances of persuading President Putin to stop the fighting were thought to be slim.

Overall, the summit in Washington was seen by most commentators as a success in comparison to Alaska. Two issues dominated the discussion – setting up a meeting between Presidents Putin and Zelensky, and security guarantees for Ukraine. Consensus emerged on these issues. There was less clarity on the larger question on when and how to bring pressure to bear on Putin to come to the table. President Trump once again backed off increasing economic sanctions on Russia, saying he would wait two weeks to see what President Putin does.

President Trump's effort to engineer a meeting between Presidents Putin and Zelensky, possibly followed by a trilateral meeting between Presidents Trump, Putin, and Zelensky, gained general support from the leaders at the summit, not least President Zelensky himself. In a surprise moment, President Trump interrupted the ongoing meeting in the Oval Office to call President Putin to discuss the idea. He reported back that President Putin was noncommittal on meeting

with Zelensky. Foreign Minister Lavrov responded that any such meeting would need to be preceded by lower-level talks between experts who would prepare the terms of agreement for Presidents Putin and Zelensky to sign. This would put the timing of any such meeting in Moscow's hands.

Not surprisingly, President Zelensky insisted that security guarantees are necessary for Ukraine to agree to any kind of settlement with Russia. The European leaders in Washington expressed their support, and President Trump did so as well. The strongest guarantee for Ukraine would be membership in NATO. Most European Allies are open to this possibility, but some are opposed. President Trump has ruled out NATO membership for Ukraine, largely because he sees it a deal breaker with President Putin. There is a long history and debate on this issue, with some saying Ukraine membership is unnecessarily provocative to Russia, and others saying Russia should have no say in any decision to invite Ukraine into NATO. Whether to use this issue as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Russia appears to be a close call.

The requirement to provide security guarantees for Ukraine led to efforts by the US and Europeans, in consultation with Ukraine, to explore possible forms for such guarantees. A "coalition of the willing" of European countries has begun to develop commitments to provide troops on the ground in Ukraine once a peace agreement is reached. This would help deter renewed Russian aggression at a later date. However, the level of forces they can commit is not only problematical but likely to draw Russian objections. As for the US, President Trump has said that it will provide support for European deployments in Ukraine but will not put US troops on the ground there. The Europeans have insisted that the US must be involved for security guarantees to be credible.

Moscow. Some have raised the question of whether President Putin would accept a stalemate in the current battle lines in order to cut his military losses and get relief from sanctions. The fact that during the Alaskan summit he persuaded President Trump to agree to seek a settlement without negotiating a cease fire leads us to believe that he is not interested in a stalemate. A ceasefire would freeze the territory he controls to the current battle lines. It seems more likely that he favors negotiating a more complex and time-consuming agreement which would allow him the opportunity to improve his battlefield position and acquire more territory working toward Russia's long-term goal of subjugating Ukraine under Russian influence.

Conclusion

All this leaves the question whether there is a deal out there that can bring an end to the fighting in Ukraine in the short term, either through a cease fire or some other kind of settlement. There does not appear to be a discernible plan yet of how to do this. The clear need is for a coherent joint strategy that the US, Ukraine, and the European allies can pursue in concert to bring maximum pressure to bear on President Putin to stop the fighting and address outstanding security issues in a subsequent negotiation. Such pressure might include expanded economic sanctions, but additional sanctions, which take time to have effect, are unlikely to change Russia's outlook.

Because Ukraine lacks sufficient military forces, especially manpower, to break through the Russian fortifications and reverse Russian military momentum, a more likely course of action for Ukraine to alter the political dynamics and strategic situation would be through an aggressive expansion of its drone and missile strikes against military, industrial and energy targets ever deeper in Russia. This

would need to be in addition to continuing enhanced support for Ukraine's front-line forces, and finally military/industrial cooperation to build up Ukraine's self-sufficiency in defense production.

These measures may not change President Putin's aims of dominating Ukraine, but in combination they might change Russian calculations about the likelihood of success of breaking through Ukraine's defenses and the increasing costs of sustaining a prolonged stalemate on the battlefield. However, expanded Ukrainian long-range strikes into Russia would likely elicit a furious response from Moscow including renewed threats of Russian nuclear escalation to pressure European leaders. This would likely increase political tensions in Europe and cause both sides to accelerate efforts to reach a ceasefire or settlement as Russia receives growing damage deep it is territory.

President Trump and European leaders must be ready to convey to President Putin that Russian intransigence will cost Russia dearly in the short and long term. Not least, Russia will not benefit from economic and other kinds of cooperation that can become possible only with an end to the fighting. This is a large inducement President Trump can press.

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