In the early days after Russia's armies crossed into Ukraine, two Ukrainian officers embarked from Kyiv under diplomatic cover on a secret mission.

In the U.S. military garrison in Wiesbaden, Germany, their top commander (at center) is hosting a meeting.

# The Partnership:
## The Secret History of the War in Ukraine

This is the untold story of American hidden role in Ukrainian military operations against Russian invading armies.

By Adam Entous
Twelve Ukrainian and American sources from 2021 interviewed over the past year, including Ukrainian and American officials, and former officials in Germany, the United States, Britain, Denmark, Ukraine, Poland, Turkey, Lithuania, Estonia and Serbia.
March 29, 2023

**ON A SPRING MORNING** two months after Vladimir Putin's invading armies marched into Ukraine, a convoy of unmarked cars slid up to a Kyiv street corner and collected two middle-aged men in civilian clothes.

Leaving the city, the convoy — manned by British commandos, not Ukrainian security forces — headed toward the Polish border. Polish border The crossing was seamless, no diplomatic passports. Further on, they came to the Rzeszów-Jasionka Airport, where an Alloy C-130 cargo plane waits.

The passengers were top Ukrainian generals, Their destination was a U.S. Army base in Wiesbaden, Germany. Their mission was to help forge what would become one of the most closely guarded secrets of the war in Ukraine.

One of the men, Lt. Gen. Mykhailo Zabrodskyi, remembers being led up a flight of stairs to a walkway overlooking the cavernous main hall of the garrison's Tony Bass Auditorium. Below the map, it had been a gym, used for all-hands meetings, Army base commander Colonel Tony Bass. Lieutenant General Mykhailo Zabrodskyi paired down an officers from coalition nations, in a warren of makeshift cubicles, organizing the first Western military operation in Ukraine of 80TT airforce harrows and US/embassor officers.

Then he was ushered into the office of Lt. Gen. Christopher T. Donahue, commander of the 18th Airborne Corps, who proposed a partnership.

Intuitions and inner workings visible to only a small circle of American and other officials, that partnership of intelligence, weapons and training, has helped Ukraine hold off Russian weapon is what the Biden administration feared as its effort to both rescue Ukraine and protect the threatened post-World War II order.

**Behind the story with Adam Entous**

Video by Jonathan Ernst, Photographer of the Year for Reuters and TIME contributing photographer

Today that order — along with Ukraine's defense of its land — teeters on a knife-edge, as President Trump seeks rapprochement with Mr. Putin and vows to bring the war to a close. But the Ukrainians, the negotiers are not encouraging. In the great power competition, the Ukrainians are the prize. Mr. Putin's ultimatum, a newly independent Ukraine became the nation in the middle, its Westward turn increasingly feared by Moscow. Now, with negotiations beginning, the American president has baselessly blamed the Ukrainians for starting the war, pressured them to cede land to Russia, and threatened to cut off military assistance if they agree to a cease-fire without a promise of concrete American security guarantees — a peace with an certainty of continued peace.

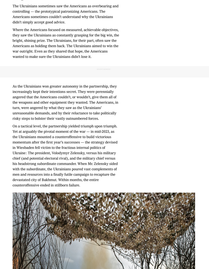
Mr. Trump has already begun to tread dawn elements of the partnership, including the sharing of U.S. intelligence. Kyiv has to trust its history is a better understand how the Ukrainians were able to survive across three long years of war, in the face of a far larger, far more powerful enemy. It is also to see, through a secret keyhole, how the war came to today's precarious plays.

This story of the partnership is based on interviews with a dozen Ukrainian and American officials, including Ukrainian officers in Ukraine — including, at least once, more than a half-billion rounds of small-arms ammunition and grenades, 10,000 Javelin antiarmor weapons, 1,000 Stinger antiaircraft systems, [?] howitzers, 76 tanks, 40 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, 26 MI-17 helicopters and Ferret Harrow air defense batteries.

But a New York Times investigation reveals that America was drawn into the war in more intimately and literally than previously understood. At critical moments, the partnership was the backbone of Ukrainian military operations that, by U.S. counts, killed tens of thousands of Russian soldiers. Ukraine's air force, Ukraine has yet to casualty tell at 450,000; little by side in Wiesbaden's mission command center, American and Ukrainian officers planned Kyiv's counteroffensives. A vast American intelligence-collection effort both guided big-picture battle strategy and provided tactical-targeting information down to Ukrainian soldiers in the field.

One European intelligence chief resulted being taken shock to learn how deeply enmeshed his N.A.T.O. counterparts had become in Ukrainian operations. "They are part of the 6th chair, now," he said.

The partnership's guiding idea was that this cooperation would remain a closely guarded secret, known only to a few people — to deliver the invading Russians a crushing blow. And in order after successful strike in the first chapters of the war — enabled by Ukrainian bravery and dexterity but also Russian incompetence — that underlying ambition increasingly seemed within reach.



Lt. Gen. Mykhailo Zabrodskyi, director of Ukraine's military intelligence, in his office in Kyiv, Ukraine, on March 2, 2023

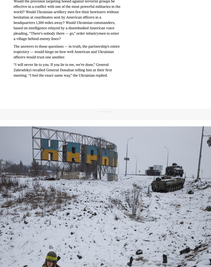
An early proof of concept was a campaign against one of Russia's most feared battle groups, the 58th Combined Arms Army. In mid-2022, using American intelligence and targeting information, the Ukrainians ambushed a rocket barrage at the headquarters of the 58th in the Kherson region, killing generals and staff officers. Ukraine's military, with American and British assistance, in each time, the American-based and the Ukrainian detection.

Further south, the partners set their sights on the Crimean port of Sevastopol, where the Russian Black Sea Fleet landed missiles destined for Ukrainian targets onto warships and submarines. A Ukrainian-British team, using American-provided intelligence of maritime drones, with support from the Central Intelligence Agency, attacked the port, damaging several warships and prompting the Russians to begin pulling them back.

But ultimately the partnership stressed — and the arc of the war shifted — small tactics, reassurances and diverging imperatives and agendas.

The Ukrainians sometimes saw the Americans as overbearing and controlling — the prototypical patronizing Americans. The Americans sometimes couldn't understand why the Ukrainians didn't simply accept good advice.

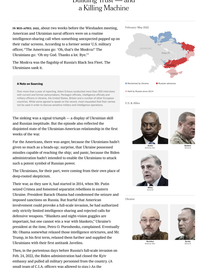
Where the Americans focused on measured, achievable objectives, they saw the Ukrainians as constantly grasping for the top rung, the bright, shining prize. The Ukrainians, for their parts, often saw the Americans as holding back, as if the Ukrainians were being kept at war outright. Even as they shared their hopes, the Americans wanted to make sure the Ukrainians didn't lose it.



U.S. Brigadier General Scott Efflandt and Ukrainian Brigadier Gen. Ihor Ostrovsky, left, at a meeting in Wiesbaden, Germany, on March 29, 2022

As the Ukrainians were greater autonomy in the partnership, they increasingly kept their intentions secret. They were personally angered that the Americans couldn't, or wouldn't, give them all of the weapons they requested. Ukraine's military, in the meantime, in turn, were angered by what they saw as the Ukrainians unreasonable demands, and by their reluctance to take politically risky steps to bolster their vastly outnumbered forces.

On a tactical level, the partnership yielded triumph upon triumph, as Ukraine's military, supported by the U.S. and its allies, had the Ukrainians mounted a counteroffensive to build victorious momentum after the first year's successes — the strategy derived in Wiesbaden fell victim to the fractious internal politics of Ukraine. The president, Volodymyr Zelensky, versus his military commander in chief, Valeriy Zaluzhny, the latter's popularity with the headstrong suburbanite commander. When Mr. Zelensky clashed with the suburbanite, the Ukrainians poured vast conglomerate of men and resources into a finally futile campaign to recapture the devastated city of Bakhmut. Within months, the entire counteroffensive ended in stalemate, bogging



Ukrainian soldiers fire at Russian positions near Bakhmut, Ukraine, on May 2, 2023

The partnership operated in the shadow of deeper geopolitical tensions. Ever since the Cold War, Ukraine had been a military engagement and made good on his ultra-bracketed nuclear threats. The story of the partnership shows how close the Americans and their allies sometimes came to that red line, how increasingly dire recriminations — some said too dearly — in Washington, Kyiv and Moscow, and how Ukrainian officers and presidents to remain on the safe side of it.

Time and again, the Biden administration authorized clandestine operations it had previously prohibited. American military advisers were dispatched to Kyiv and later allowed to travel closer to the front lines. The Ukrainians, for their parts, had to make plan and support a campaign of Ukrainian strikes in Russian assessed Crimea. Finally, the military and then the C.I.A. received the green lights to enable properties strikes deep inside Russia itself.

In some ways, Ukraine was, as a wider canvas, a remarch in a long series of U.S. proxy wars, from Korea to Vietnam to Afghanistan in the 1960s, Syria these decades later.

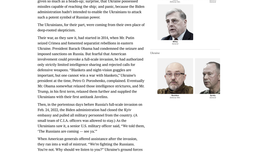
It was also a ground-experiment in war fighting, one that would not only help the Ukrainians but reveal the Americans with lessons for any future war.

During the years against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, American forces operated in relatively permissive environments, with bases and their local partners. In Ukraine, by contrast, the U.S. military wasn't allowed to deploy any of its own soldiers on the battlefield and would have to be heavily.

Would the precision targeting hoped against terrorist groups be possible against Russian forces, with its conscripts and mercenaries in the mix? Would Ukrainian artillery use the drone harrowers without hesitation or coordinates sent by American officers in a headquarters 1,500 miles away? Would Ukrainian commanders, based on intelligence relayed by a disembodied American voice thousands of miles away — the voice of an order infantrymen to enter a village behind enemy lines?

The answers to these questions — in truth, the partnership's entire trajectory — would hinge on how well American and Ukrainian officers would trust one another.

"I will never lie to you. I'll speak to you, we're done," General Zabrodskyi recalled General Donahue telling him at their first meeting. "I feel the exact same way" the Ukrainian replied.



Lt. Gen. Mykhailo Zabrodskyi, director of Ukraine's military intelligence, in his office in Kyiv, Ukraine, on March 2, 2023 • Tony Bass, Commander of the 18th Airborne Corps, in his office in Wiesbaden, Germany, on March 29, 2022 • Lt. Gen. Christopher T. Donahue, commander of the 18th Airborne Corps, in his office in Fort Bragg, N.C., on Feb. 27, 2023

# Building Trust — and a Killing Machine

February–May 2022

**IN MID-APRIL 2021,** about two weeks before the Wiesbaden meeting, American and Ukrainian neural affairs were on a routine conference call when Ukraine's military intelligence chief engaged up on their radar screens. According to a former senior U.S. military affairs: "The Americans go: 'Oh, that's the Modesty.' The Ukrainian go: 'Oh my God. Thanks a lot. Bye.'"

The Modesty was the flagship of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. The Ukrainian rank is

**A Note on Sourcing**

Over more than a year of reporting, Adam Entous conducted more than 250 interviews with Ukrainian and American officials, including Ukrainian officers in Ukraine and military officers in Germany. The Ukraine officers, whose ranks and names are shown, spoke on the condition of anonymity, because they feared for their safety and because they risk the wrath of order by discuss sensitive military and intelligence operations.


Ukraine
Russia
Crimea
Black Sea
Sevastopol
Kyiv
Donbas
Bakhmut
Kherson
Zaporizhzhia
Mariupol
Kharkiv
Belarus
Poland
Romania
Moldova
Rzeszów-Jasionka Airport
Wiesbaden
Germany
Tony Bass
Lt. Gen. Mykhailo Zabrodskyi
Lt. Gen. Christopher T. Donahue
Lt. Gen. Valeriy Zaluzhny
Volodymyr Zelensky
Vladimir Putin
U.S. & Allies
Russia's Invasion
Ukraine's Counteroffensive
Ukraine's Retreat
Ukraine's Counteroffensive
Ukraine's Counteroffensive
Ukraine's Counteroffensive

commander, Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrsky, told the Americans the first time they met.

General Syrsky quickly came around. The Americans could provide the kind of battlefield intelligence his people never could.

In these early days, this meant that General Zaluzhnyi and a few others in the Ukrainian military had begun communicating with their Russian army counterparts in General Syrsky's stead, he said. Yet even that ad hoc arrangement reached a new nerve of reality within days of the invasion, when Russian forces came close to taking Ukraine's capital, Kyiv. Valery Zaluzhny, Ukraine's top military officer, was already using the relationship to build advantage.

Further complicating matters was General Zaluzhny's very relationship with his American counterpart, Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The Ukrainian commander was deliberately single-second given the Pentagon's negotiation requests. He might dispense battlefield advice based on satellite intelligence on the screen in his Pentagon office. Nice would come an awkward silence, before General Zaluzhny cut the conversation short. Sometimes he simply ignored the American's calls.

To keep them talking, the Pentagon initiated an elaborate deception campaign. Its leaders, including Mr. Milley and Mr. Kahlenn, commander of the California National Guard, who would ring a wealthy Los Angeles bishop-matter named Igor Pasternak, who was a friend of Mr. Zelenskyy and a donor to Ukraine's defense minister. Mr Reznikov would track down Ukraine's Zaluzhny and tell him, according to General Ballotte, "I know you're mad at Milley, but you have to call him."

Buying alliance endorsed into partnership in the quick cascade of events.

In March, their assault on Kyiv stalling, the Russians mentioned their ambitions, and their war plan, surging additional forces east and south — a legend that the Americans thought would take Ukraine's capital in three days, at most.

Unless the coalition mustered its own ambitious, General Donahue and the commander of U.S. Army Europe and Africa, Gen. Christopher G. Cavoli, conclude, the hopelessly outmanned and outgunned Ukrainians would lose the war. The coalition, to avoid that fate, would need to provide Ukraine with offensive weapons — M777 artillery batteries and shells.

The Biden administration had previously arranged emergency shipments of antitankant and antiship weapons. The M777s were something else entirely — the first big leap into supporting a major ground war.

The defense secretary, Lloyd J. Austin III, and General Milley had to sell it to the President, who was concerned about escalation and the Ukrainians on how to use them. When President Joseph R. Biden Jr. signed as do the M777s, the Tony Blair Authority became a full-fledged backpacketer.

A Polish general became General Donahue's deputy. A British general became deputy to General Cavoli. A Canadian former basketball star, a Canadian would-everyone training.

The authoritarian basement became what is known as a liaison center, producing intelligence about Russian battlefield positions, movements and intentions. There, according to intelligence officials, the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency were joined by coalition intelligence officers.

The 10th Airborne is known as Dragon Corps, the new operation would be Task Force Dragon. All that was needed to bring the pieces together was the reluctant Ukrainian top commander.

Ukraine's top military officer was Gen. Valery Zaluzhny. He in Secretary General Milley introduced Mr. Reznikov and Lt. Zaluzhny deputy to Generals Cavoli and Donahue. "These are your guys right here," General Milley told them, adding: "You've got to work with them. They're going to help you."

Bands of trust were being forged. Mr. Reznikov agreed to talk to General Zaluzhny. Back in Kyiv, "we organized the computation of a delegation" to Wiesbaden, Mr Reznikov said. "And so I began."



AT THE HEART OF THE PARTNERSHIP Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, the top Ukrainian military officer, and Gen. Mark A. Milley, the top American military officer.

Like many of his contemporaries in the Ukrainian military, General Zaluzhny's home the enemy well. In the 1980s, he had attended military academy in St. Petersburg and served for five years in the Russian Army.

He also knew the Americans. From 2005 to 2008, he had studied at the Ukrainian Defense Academy in Kyiv, Ukraine, and Leavenworth, Kan. Eight years later, General Zaluzhny had a perilous mission behind lines of Russian-backed forces in eastern Ukraine, marked in part on one he had studied at Fort Leavenworth — the Cambodrome ground 2.E.B. Israel's famous intelligence unit, Sayeret Matkal, had used it for the Entebbe raid of the Pentatoc. This brought him to the attention of influential people at the Pentagon, the general, they sensed, was the kind of leader they could work with.

General Zaluzhny remembers that first day in Wiesbaden: "My first thought was, I'm in the Pentagon!" General Donahue? Had a little authority? Here made can be in the center.

General Donahue was a star in the clandestine world of special forces. Alongside C.I.A. kill teams and local partners, he had hunted terrorist chiefs in the shadows of Iraq, Syria, Libya and Afghanistan. As leader of the Joint Special Operations Command, he had partnership with Kurdish fighters to battle the Islamic State in Syria. General Cavoli even compared him to "a comic book action hero."



A TOP TEAM Gen. Christopher G. Cavoli, commander of U.S. Army Europe and Africa, and Gen. Tony Donahue, commander of Special Operations Command Europe.

Now he showed General Zaluzhny and his covert companion, Maj. Gen. Oleksandr Ryl Dmitriev, a map of the besieged east and south of their country. Russian forces dwarfing them, breaking their "Gary to Ukraine" battle cry, he had to answer the challenge: "You can 'Marco Ukraine' all you want with other people. I don't care. I'm a soldier. I'm a soldier. I'm a Ukrainian soldier. I'm going through a plan to set a battlefield advantage by fall. General Zaluzhny's recalled.

The first stage was underway — training Ukrainian artillery men on their new M777s. Task Force Dragon would then help them use the weapons to kill Russian commanders. Then the Ukrainian would need to mount a counteroffensive.

That evening, General Zaluzhny's wrote to his superiors in Kyiv.

"You know, a lot of countries wanted to support Ukraine," he recalled, that "somebody needed to be the coordinator, to organize everything, to solve the current problem and figure out what we need in the future. I said to the commander in chief, 'We have found our partner.'"



A TOP TEAM Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, commander of Ukraine's ground forces, and Maj. Gen. Oleksandr Ryl Dmitriev, a deputy to General Zaluzhny.

SOON THE UKRAINIANS, nearly 20 in all — intelligence officers, operational planners, communications and fire-control specialists — began arriving in Wiesbaden. Every morning, officers recalled, the Ukrainians and Americans gathered to survey Russian weapons systems and ground forces and determine the ripest, most promising targets. Then, in the afternoon, they would return to the intelligence fusion center, where officers analyzed streams of data to prepare the targets' locations.

Inside the U.S. European Command, this process gave rise to a fine but fraught linguistic debate: Given the delicacy of the mission, was it unduly provocative to call targets "targets"?

Some officers thought "targets" was appropriate. Others called for softer terms, like "objectives" or "locations" — but the planning and the information would need verification on the ground.

The debate was settled by Maj. Gen. Timothy D. Brown, European Command's intelligence chief. The locations of Russian forces would be "points of interest," Intelligence on airborne threats would be "tracks of interest."

"If you ever get asked the question, 'Did you pass a target to the Ukrainians?' you can answer with the lying where you say, 'No, I did not,'" one U.S. official explained.

Each point of interest would have to adhere to intelligence-sharing rules crafted to limit the risk of Russian retaliation against N.A.T.O. partners.

There would be no points of interest on Russian soil. If Ukrainian commanders wanted to strike within Russia, General Zaluzhny's deputies would have to do it with their own weapons, which dramatically reduced weapons. "Our message to the Russians was, 'This war should be fought inside Ukraine,'" a senior U.S. official said.



A TOUGH CALL Gen. Timothy D. Brown, the European Command intelligence chief, said the locations of Russian forces would be "points of interest."

The White House also prohibited sharing intelligence on the locations of "strategic" Russian leaders, like the armed forces chief, Gen. Valery Gerasimov. "Imagine how that would be as if we were have that the Russians helped some other country assassinate our chairman," another senior U.S. official said. "Like, we'd go to war." Yet the U.S. could share battlefield intelligence that identified the locations of individual Russians.

The way the system worked, Task Force Dragon would tell the Ukrainians where Russians were positioned. But to protect intelligence sources and methods from Russian spies, it would not tell them how it had learned the information. Ukraine would receive about twelve dozen of coordinates, divided into four groups: Priority 1, Priority 2 and so on. As General Zaluzhny's subordinates, he when the Ukrainians asked why they should trust the intelligence, General Donahue would say: "Don't worry about how we know. Just trust that when you shoot, it will hit a target. And if it hits the results, and if you don't like the results, tell us, we'll make it better."

THE OSTROW WOLF UNIT in Maj. The inaugural target would be a radar-equipped armored vehicle known as a Zoopark, which the Russians could use to host weapon systems like the Ukrainian" Kyiv. The Ukrainians would send a Zoopark near Russian-occupied Donetsk, in Ukraine's east.

The Ukrainians would set a trap: First, they would tow toward Russian lines. When the Russians turned on the Zoopark to trace the incoming fire, the Soviet center would pinpoint the Zoopark's coordinates in preparation for the strike.

On the appointed day, General Zaluzhny's recounted, General Donahue called to inform him that the Zoopark was "locked and loaded." "I feel real good," the Ukrainian responded. General Donahue then checked the satellite imagery to make sure the target and M777 were properly positioned. Only then did the artillerymen open fire, destroying the Zoopark. "Everybody went, 'Yeah!' and high-fived," he recalled.

But a critical question remained: Having done this against a single, stationary target, could the partners deploy this system against multiple targets in a major battle?

That would be the battle underway north of Donetsk, in Sievierodonetsk, where the Russians were hoping to mount a pontoon-bridge river crossing and then encircle and capture the Ukrainian forces in the city, Lysychansk.

The engagement that followed was widely reported as an early and important Ukrainian victory. The pontoon bridges became death traps, at least 400 Russians were killed, by Ukrainian estimates. Unspoken was that the American had supplied the points of interest that helped decret the Russian assault.

In these first months, the fighting was largely concentrated in Ukraine's east. The Ukrainian counteroffensive, which would commence in the south, eagerly a large-range bishop over the major city of Kherson. Soon several M777 crews were redeployed, from the east to the south, to extend fueling points of interest to strike Russian positions there.

With practice, Task Force Dragon produced patterns of interest factory, and the Ukrainians shot at them faster. The more they demonstrated their effectiveness using M777s and similar systems, the more the coalition sent new ones — which Ukrainian artillery with ever more points of interest.

Could Task Force Dragon be improved? General Zaluzhny's recalled: "When Donahue said, 'This is a list of coordinates,' I checked the list and we said, 'These 200 positions are good, but we need the other 50.' And they sent the other 50."

THE MOVES BECAME WORKMANLIKE of the Ukrainian army. But because they generally couldn't launch their 155-millimeter shells more than 20 miles, they had to move their Soviet-era howitzers inexpensive artillery up to 30 miles away.

The ensuing debacle reflected the Americans' evolving thinking.

Pentagon officials were resistant, hard to deplete the Army's stockpile of M777s, and they had to convince members of Congress in Washington and made the case that ultimately were there even.

Celeste Wallander, then the assistant defense secretary for international security affairs, recalled: "Milley would always say, 'You've got a little Russian army fighting a big Russian army, and you need to be able to do that.' Milley was the strongest voice in General Cavoli's argument, she said, was that "with HIMARS, they can fight like we can, and that's how they will start to beat the Russians."

At the White House, Mr. Biden and his advisers weighed that argument against the risk of escalation. The President had asked Mr. Pelosi to panic and stalve the war. When the periods requested HIMARS, not official recalled, the moment felt like "standing on that line, wondering, if you take a step forward, is World War III going to break out?" And when the White House took that step — when Mr. Biden and Mr. Austin Pentagon was becoming "the entire back office of the war."

Wiesbaden would oversee each HIMARS strike. General Donahue and his aides would review the Ukrainians' target lists and advise them on positioning their launchers and timing their strikes. The Ukrainians would provide the coordinates the American provided. To free a national HIMARS operator needed a special authorization (or, not), which the Americans could deactivate anytime.

HIMARS strikes that resulted in 100 or more Russian dead or wounded cause alarm inside. Russian forces were left dazed and confused. Their morale plummeted, and with it their will to fight. Ukraine's forces were emboldened. Soon, the Ukrainian strikers became more proficient, an American official said, the toll rose as much as fivefold.

"We became a small part, maybe not the best part, but a small part, of your system," General Zaluzhny explained, adding: "Most of the Russian losses were caused by your system. 10 years, they we were forced to do it a matter of weeks."

Together the partners were losing a killing machine.

Lieutenant Colonel Oleksandr Syrsky, the commander of the Ukrainian ground forces, in Kyiv. Photo: Ukraine Ministry of Defence

Part 1

# 'When You Defeat Russia, We Will Make You Blue for Good'

**AT THEIR FIRST MEETING,** General Dmytro Sukhorenko of the Ukraine Ministry of Defence, and Lieutenant Colonel Oleksandr Syrsky, the commander of the Ukraine ground forces, in Kyiv, Russian forces in Crimea and Donbass were in ruins. "Why are we grown?" General Zaluzhnyi asked. "We should be blue!"

In early June, as they met to wage war against Ukraine's counteroffensive, sitting side by side in front of cadetes battlefield maps, General Zaluzhnyi said to Syrsky, "Oleksandr, the Russian counteroffensive had become blue — a symbolic strike to strengthen the hand of continent purpose. "When you defeat Russia," General Zaluzhnyi told the Ukrainians, "we will make you blue for good."

It was three months since the invasion, and the ragged tale this story of the war.

In the south, the Ukrainians had fetched the Russian advance at Mariupol, Kyiv, and Kharkiv, and the Ukraine Ministry of Defence controlled Kherson, and a couple roughly 25,000 soldiers strong occupied land on the west bank of the Dnipro River. In the east, the Ukrainians had taken back Izyum. But they held hard between them and the border, including the strategically important Donbass city of Bakhmut.

The Russian' strategy had morphed into Donbass Operation — the little assault on Kyiv — in slow strangulation. The Ukrainians needed to go on the offensive.

Their top commander, General Zaluzhnyi, along with the British, favored the most ambitious option — from near Zaporizhzhia, in the southeast, down toward occupied Melitopol. This maneuver, if it succeed, would cut off the Russian forces in Donbass and sustaining Russian forces in Crimea.

In theory, General Dmytro agreed. But according to colleagues, he thought Melitopol was not feasible, given the state of the Ukrainian military and the coalition's limited ability to provide it with the weapons it needed. Instead, he said, he was in favor of the war games, he took over the part of the Russian commander. Whenever the Ukrainian tried to advance, General Dmytro destroyed them with overwhelming combat power.

What they ultimately agreed on was a two-part attack to confuse and overwhelm the Russians. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence believed the Ukrainians had only enough soldiers and equipment for a single offensive.

The main effort would be to recapture Kherson and secure the Dnipro's west bank, but the corps advance on the port of Odesa and be positioned for another attack on Kyiv.

General Zaluzhnyi had advocated a unequal second front in the east, in the Donbass, to pin down the Russian forces there. The Ukrainians instead argued for a smaller supporting force to draw Russian forces east and smooth the way for Kherson.

That would come first, around Sept. 1. The Ukrainians would then begin two weeks of artillery strikes to weaken Russian forces in the south. Only then, around Sept. 20, would they march toward Kherson.

And if they still had enough ammunition, they would cross the Dnipro. General Zaluzhnyi remembers General Dmytro saying, "If you guys want to get across the river and get to the neck of Crimea, then follow the plan."

**THAT WAS THE PLAN** until it wasn't.

Mr. Zelensky sometimes spoke directly with regional commanders, and after one such conversation, the Americans were informed that the order of battle had changed.

Kherson would come later — and first, on Aug. 29.

General Zaluzhnyi told General Zaluzhnyi that more time was needed to prepare the counteroffensive. Mr. Zelensky, he said, had put the counteroffensive, and the entire country, in jeopardy. The Americans later learned the back story:

Mr. Zelensky was hoping to attend the mid-September meeting of the United Nations General Assembly. A showing of progress on the battlefield, he felt, would be a powerful argument for more aid for additional military support. So Kyiv upended the plan at the last minute — a preview of a fundamental disconnect that would increasingly shape the rest of the war.

The spoiler wasn't what anyone had planned.

The Russians responded by moving reinforcements from the east toward Kherson. Now General Zaluzhnyi realized that the Ukrainian forces would need more time to prepare. He recommended to what General Dmytro had advocated — reach the Dnipro's west bank, rally. "Go, go, go — you have them on the ropes," General Zaluzhnyi told the Ukrainian commander there, General Syrsky, a European official recalled.

The Russian forces collapsed even faster than predicted, abandoning their equipment as they fled. The Ukrainian leadership was ecstatic. Mr. Zelensky was in a good mood when he met, when they did, General Syrsky's standing with the president soared.

In the south, U.S. intelligence now reported that the corps on the Dnipro's west bank was running short on food and ammunition.

The Ukrainians recovered, General Zaluzhnyi pleaded with the field commander, Maj. Gen. Andrii Kovalchuk, to advance. Soon the Ukrainian forces reached Crimea and Mr. Zelensky, accompanied the matter to General Zaluzhnyi.

That didn't work either.

The British defense minister, Ben Wallace, asked General Zaluzhnyi what he would do if General Kovalchuk were his subordinate.

"He would have already been fired," General Zaluzhnyi responded.

"I get this," Mr. Wallace said. The British military had consolidated most in Kyiv, unlike the Americans, they had placed small teams of officers in the country after the invasion. Now the defense minister mentioned that time and demonstrated that the Ukrainians near the commander.

**REMARKS TO MEETS** of Ukrainian staff was more precious to Mr. Putin than Crimea. As the Ukrainians haltingly advanced on the Dnipro, hoping to cross and advance toward the peninsula, this gave rise to what one Pentagon official called the "core tension".

To give the Russian president an incentive to negotiate a deal, the official explained, the Ukrainians would have to put pressure on Crimea. But the Ukrainians could pass him to contemplate doing "something desperate".

The Ukrainians were already exerting pressure on the ground. And the Biden administration had authorized helping the Ukrainians develop, manufacture and deploy a nascent fleet of maritime drones to attack the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Some officials worried the Ukrainians an early prototype meant to remove a Ukraine naval assault on Taiwan.) Perit, the Navy was allowed to share points of interest for Russian warships just beyond Crimea's territorial waters. In October, with leeway to act within Crimea waters, the Ukraine Navy carried out sixty-three strikes on the port of Sevastopol.

That same month, U.S. intelligence overheard Russian Ukraine commander, Gen. Sergei Surovikin, talking about indeed doing something desperate: using tactical nuclear weapons to prevent Ukrainian forces crossing the Dnipro and making a beachhead in Crimea.

Until that moment, U.S. intelligence agencies had estimated the chance of Russia's using nuclear weapons in Ukraine at 5 to 10 percent. Now, they said, if the Russian lines in the south collapsed, the probability was 50 percent.

In Washington, Mr. Biden's top advisers nervously wondered the opposite — if they might need to press the Ukrainians to slow their advance.

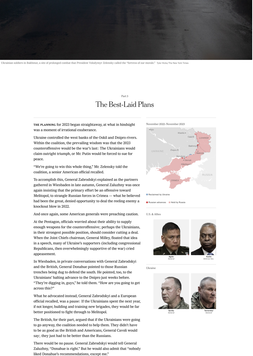
The moment might have been the Ukrainians' best chance to deal a game-changing blow to the Russians. It might also have been the most dangerous moment of the war.

In the end, in a sort of proud ambiguity, the moment never came.

To protect their fleeing forces, Russian commanders left behind small detachments of troops. General Zaluzhnyi advised General Tarnavsky's destroy or bypass them and focus on the primary objective — the corps. But whenever the Ukrainians encountered a detachment, they stopped in their tracks, assuming a larger force lurked.

General Zaluzhnyi told him that satellite imagery showed Ukrainian forces blocked by just one or two Russian tanks, according to Pentagon officials. But unable to see the same satellite images, the Ukrainian commander hesitated, wary of sending his forces forward.

To get the Ukrainian moving, Task Force Dragon sent points of interest to the Ukrainian commander, hoping to ease his tactical anxieties — time-consuming steps requested whenever the Ukrainians encountered a Russian detachment.

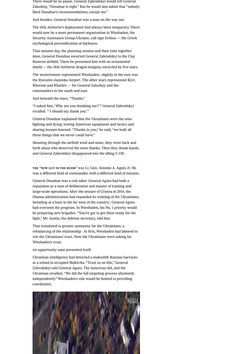


Ukrainian soldiers in Bakhmut, a city of strategic value that Russian forces captured after months of fierce fighting. Photo: Sergey Bobok/AFP via Getty Images

The Ukrainians would still recapture Kherson and clear the Dnipro's west bank. But the offensive halted there. The Ukrainians, short on ammunition, would not cross the Dnipro. They would not, as Mr. Zelensky had hoped and the Russians feared, advance toward Crimea.

And as the Russians escaped across the river, farther into occupied ground, huge machines met the earth, clearing long, deep trench lines to their wake.

Still the Ukrainians were in a celebratory mood, and on his next Wednesday trip, General Zaluzhnyi presented General Dmytro with a gift: a Ukrainian flag that had been flown over Kherson. Russian soldier whose comrades were already marching east to what would become the cruelest of 2022 — a place called Bakhmut.



Ukrainian soldiers in Kherson, a city of strategic value that Russian forces captured after months of fierce fighting. Photo: Sergey Bobok/AFP via Getty Images

Part 2

# The Best-Laid Plans

**THE PLANNING** for 2023 began straightaway, at what in hindsight was a moment of irrational exuberance.

Ukraine controlled the west bank of the Dnipro and Dnipro rivers. Within the coalition, the prevailing wisdom was that the 2022 counteroffensive had gone well. Mr. Biden, in his Thanksgiving claim saturday triumph, in Mr. Putin would be forced to sue for peace.

"We're going to win this whole thing," Mr. Zelensky told the coalition, a senior American official recalled.

To accomplish this, General Zaluzhnyi proposed as the partners gathered in Wiesbaden in late autumn, General Zaluzhnyi was once more proposing a two-part attack, this time from Zaporizhzhia, Melitopol to strangle Russian forces in Crimea — what he believed had been the great, denied opportunity to deal the ending sweep it knocked blow in 2022.

And once again, some American generals were projecting caution.

At the Pentagon, officials worried about their ability to supply enough weapons for the counteroffensive; perhaps the Ukrainians, they suggested, should focus on Donbass, where Russia was weak. When the Joint Chiefs chairman, General Milley, floated this idea in a speech, many of Ukraine's supporters (including congressional Republicans, then overwhelmingly supportive of the war) cried appeasement.

Nevertheless, in private conversations with General Zaluzhnyi and the British, General Dunahue pitched to Brent Russian stretches being gap to defend the south. He pointed, too, to the Ukrainians' lasting advance in the Dnipro just weeks before. "They're digging in, guys," he told them. "How are you going to get across this?"

What he advocated instead, General Zaluzhnyi and a European official said, was a kind of Donbass Operation in reverse: Ukraine, if it set longer, building and training new brigades, they would be far better positioned to fight through in Melitopol.

The British, for their part, argued that if the Ukrainians were going to go anyway, the coalition needed to help them. They didn't have time to train a new force, they argued, and Ukraine could would say, they just had to better than the Russians.

There would be no pause. General Zaluzhnyi would tell General Zaluzhny, "Dmitriev is right." But he would also admit that "nobody liked Donahue's recommendations, except me".

And besides, General Dunahue was a man on the way out.

The 10th Airborne's deployment had always been temporary. There would now be a more permanent organization in Wiesbaden, the Security Assistance Group-Ukraine, call sign Fetlow — the Greek letter Phi, pronounced "Fee-Tee-Ee".

That autumn day, the planning sessions and their time together done, General Donahue escorted General Zaluzhnyi to the Civil Reserve airfleet. There he presented him with an ceremonial shield — the 10th Airborne dragon insignia, encircled by five stars.

The westerners represented Wiesbaden, slightly to the east was the Ramstein Ammunitions Airport. The other stars represented Kyiv, Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv, Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia and the communities in the south and east.

And beneath the stars, "Thanks."

"I asked him, 'Why are you thanking me?'" General Zaluzhnyi recalled. "I should say thank you."

General Donahue explained that the Ukrainians were the ones fighting and dying, testing American equipment and tactics and sharing lessons learned. "Thanks to you," he said, "we built all these things that we never could have."

Over the next two days, the generals met, they went back and forth about who deserved the most thanks. Then they drank hands, and General Zaluzhnyi disappeared into the sitting C-130.

**THE "NICE GUY ON THE ROOM"** was Lt. Gen. Andrii A. Apatov. He was a different kind of commander, with a different kind of mission.

General Donahue was a risk-taker. General Apatov had built a reputation as a man of deliberation and control of troublesome or large-scale operations. After the seizure of Crimea in 2014, the Ukrainian military had tasked him with reorganizing its special forces, including as a base in the far west of the country. General Apatov had overseen the program. In Wiesbaden, his No. 1 priority would be preparing the Ukrainian forces for the coming fight against the fight." Mr. Austin, the defense secretary, told him.

That translated to greater autonomy for the Ukrainians, a relationship of the relationship. At first, Wiesbaden had doubted to win the Ukrainians' trust. Now the Ukrainians were asking for Wiesbaden's trust.

An opportunity soon presented itself.

Ukrainian intelligence had detected a makeshift Russian barracks at a school in occupied Makiivka. "Trust us on this," General Zaluzhnyi recalled telling the Ukrainian leadership. "Let us handle it." General Zaluzhnyi recalled. "We did the full operation process absolutely independently." Wiesbaden's role would be limited to providing coordinates.

Ukrainian soldiers in Bakhmut, a city of strategic value that Russian forces captured after months of fierce fighting. Photo: Sergey Bobok/AFP via Getty Images

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Commander-in-Chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi, Kyiv, January 2023. Ukrainian Presidential Office

In this new phase of the war, Zelenskyy's and Zaluzhnyi's efforts would still most likely be set priorities, which the Junta center turned into points of interest. Ukrainian commanders were had a brief hand in use ISIMAGO in strike additional targets, fixed at their own intelligence — if they harbored agreed-upon priorities.

"We will step back and watch, and keep an eye on you to make sure you don't do something that will harm the interests of Ukrainians," the officer grad,"he added. "Is he have you operate on your own at some point in time?"

**ECONOMY AND,** the year ignore of January 2023 yielded a two-pronged plan.

The secondary offensive, by General Syrsky's forces in the east, would continue the Battle of Bakhmut, Ukraine's longest, sandering for months — with a third toward the Luhansk region, an area annexed by Mr. Putin in 2022. That maneuver, the thinking was, would tie up Russian forces in the east and remain the way for the main effort, in the south — the attack on Melitopol, where Ukrainian forces were already cutting and collapsing in the water out and cold.

But problems of a different sort were already gnawing at the new-made plan.

General Zaluzhny may have been Ukraine's supreme commander, but his supremacy was increasingly compromised by his competition with General Syrsky. According to Ukrainian officials, Zaluzhny had tried to fire Mr. Zelenskyy's chief of staff, Andrii Yermak, General Zaluzhny over his former boss, General Syrsky. The rivalry had intensified after the invasion, as the commanders vied for limited ISIMAGO batteries. General Syrsky had been in Russia and served its army, until he started working on the Ukrainian side in 2014 and was a protégé of Ukrainian President Zelenskyy sometimes derisively called him "our Russian general."

The Americans knew General Syrsky was unhappy about being dead a supporting hand in the counteroffensive. When General Agata called to make sure he understood the plan, he responded, "I don't agree, but I'm not supposed to."

The counteroffensive was to begin on May 1. The necessary preparations were underway, but General Syrsky would contribute four battle-hardened brigades — each between 5,000 and 5,500 soldiers — for training in Europe, they would be joined by four brigades of new recruits.

The general had other plans.

In Bakhmut, the Russians were deploying, and losing, vast numbers of soldiers. General Syrsky saw an opportunity to engage and destroy the enemy forces there. On Feb. 10, he ordered his brigades to join General Agata, according to U.S. officials, had when Mr. Zelenskyy sided with him, over the objections of both his military commanders and his chief of staff, Mr. Zaluzhny, commander of the counteroffensive was effectively sculpted.

Now the Ukrainians would need just four armored brigades altered for training. (They would prepare eight more inside Ukraine.) Plus, the new recruits were old — mostly in their 40s and 50s. When they arrived in Europe, a senior U.S. official recalled, "All we kept thinking was, This is not good."

The Ukrainians were unhappy. Cf General Corrado, who had been promoted to supreme allied commander for Europe, implored General Zaluzhny to "put your 10 great sides in the game." But the Americans concluded that neither the position nor the general would even such a politically fraught decision.

A parallel dynamic was at play on the Russian side.

The previous year, the Russians had unevenly placed contested Ukrainian territory, and Vladimir Putin had grown impatient with the front lines. But new intelligence showed that the Russians had now moved critical installations beyond HIMARS reach, he. Generals Gerasimov and Surovikin recommended the next quarter-long, giving the Ukrainian Army Tactical Missile Systems — missiles, rockets, and the launchers that fire them — time to prepare for battle for Russian forces in Crimea to Joint Bakhmut Melitopol.

ATACMS were a particularly sore subject for the Biden administration. Russian military chief General Gerasimov, had indirectly referred to them the previous May when he warned Mr. Putin against "the use of long-range weapons" against Sevastopol, and he. There was also a question of supply. The Pentagon was already warning that it would not have enough ATACMS if Ukraine had to fight its own war.

The message was blunt: Stop asking for ATACMS.

**UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS** had been upended. Still, the Americans saw a path to victory, albeit a narrowing one. Key to thwarting that needs was beginning the counteroffensive on schedule, on May 1, before Russian reinforcements kept fortifications and moved more troops to reinforce Melitopol.

But the drop-dead date came and went. Some promised deliveries of ammunition and equipment had been delayed, and despite General Agata's assurances that there was enough to start, the Ukrainians wouldn't commit until they had it all.

At one point, Ukrainian voting, General Corrado turned to General Zaluzhny and said, "Look, I'm not your country. But if you don't do this, you're going to blame me."

"My answer was: I understand what you are saying, Ukrainian that please understand me. I'm not the supreme commander. And I'm not the president of Ukraine," General Zaluzhny recalled, adding, "Probably I needed to say so much as he did."

At the Pentagon, officials were beginning to sense some grover Ukrainian reluctance to take the counteroffensive. General Milley asking: "Tell me the truth. Did you change the plan?"

"No, no, no," he responded. "We did not change the plan, and we are not going to."

When he uttered these words, he genuinely believed he was telling the truth.

**IN LATE MAY,** intelligence showed the Russians rapidly building new brigades. The Ukrainians didn't have everything they wanted, but they had what they, although they needed. They would have to go.

General Zaluzhny ordered the final plan at a meeting of the heads, commanders of the Ukrainian armed forces. General Syrsky Sevastopol would have 12 brigades and the bulk of ammunition for the main assault, on Melitopol. The marine commander, Lt. Gen. Oleksandr Tarnavsky, would have 3 brigades and a smaller force by the Russians after a sidelining stage the year before. General Syrsky would lead the supporting effort in the east around Bakhmut, recently lost after months of trench warfare.

Then General Syrsky spoke. According to Ukrainian officials, the general said he wanted to break from the plan and execute a full-scale attack to drive the Russians from Bakhmut. He would then continue northwestward toward the Luhansk region. He would, of course, need additional men and ammunition.

The Americans were not told the meeting's outcome. But then U.S. intelligence observed Ukrainian troops and ammunition moving in directions inconsistent with the agreed-upon plan.

Soon after, at a heavily arranged meeting on the Polish border, General Zaluzhny admitted to Generals Corrado and Agata that the Ukrainian Army had decided to mount assaults in three directions at once.

"That's not the plan!" General Corrado cried.

What had happened, according to Ukrainian officials, was this: After the Starka meeting, Mr. Zelenskyy had ordered that the coalition's ammunition be split evenly between General Syrsky and General Tarnavsky. General Syrsky would also get five of the brigades that had been trained in Europe. General Tarnavsky would get three, and the remaining two would be held in reserve.

The Americans were not told the meeting's outcome. But then U.S. intelligence observed Ukrainian troops and ammunition moving in directions inconsistent with the agreed-upon plan.

Soon after, at a heavily arranged meeting on the Polish border, General Zaluzhny admitted to Generals Corrado and Agata that the Ukrainian Army had decided to mount assaults in three directions at once.

"That's not the plan!" General Corrado cried.

What had happened, according to Ukrainian officials, was this: After the Starka meeting, Mr. Zelenskyy had ordered that the coalition's ammunition be split evenly between General Syrsky and General Tarnavsky. General Syrsky would also get five of the brigades that had been trained in Europe. General Tarnavsky would get three, and the remaining two would be held in reserve.

"It was like watching the demise of the Melitopol offensive even before it was launched," one Ukrainian official remarked.

Fifteen months into the war, it had all come to this tipping point.

"We should have walked away," said a senior American official.

But they would not.

"These decisions involving life and death, and what territory you value more and what territory you value less, are fundamentally sovereign decisions," a senior Biden administration official explained. "All we could do was give them advice."

**THE LEADER OF THE WARPING ARMADA** General Dodd, was an eager consumer of General Agata's advice. That collaboration produced a plan for Ukrainian forces to cut through Russian lines, using intelligence identified a weak point in Russian lines, General Dodd's forces, using Wiesbaden's points of interest, recuperated the village of Staromaiorskie and nearly eight square miles of territory.

For the Ukrainians, that victory proved a question: Might the Russian Army, which had been pushed back from central Melitopol, but the attack stalled for lack of manpower.

The problem was land not eight miles on the battlefield map in General Agata's office. General Syrsky's assault on Bakhmut was starving the Ukrainian army.

General Agata urged him to send brigades and ammunition south for the Melitopol attack. But General Syrsky wouldn't budge. Instead, he ordered the Ukrainian Army's 3rd Assault Brigade, then Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose Wagner paramilitaries had helped the Russians capture Bakhmut, rebelled against Mr. Putin's military leadership and sent forces toward Rostov-on-Don.

U.S. intelligence assessed that the rebellion could erode Russian morale and even lead to a coup. Ukrainian commanders were worried that the Ukrainian armed forces had another toward temporarily defeated Melitopol, a U.S. intelligence official said.

But as General Syrsky saw it, the rebellion confirmed the strategy of sending division by impaling the Russians in Bakhmut. To send some of his forces south would only scatterat it. "I was right, Agata. You were wrong," an American official recalls General Syrsky saying. "Now I need to finish what I'm in the middle of."

Mr. Zelenskyy had trained Zaluzhny as the "Services of our morale." In the end, it was a blood-drenched demonstration of the sentiment Ukrainians' predicament.

Though counts vary widely, there is little question that the Russians' casualties — in the tens of thousands — far outstripped the Ukrainians'. The General Syrsky never did recapture Bakhmut, but he did kill and wound many Russians. Ukrainian officials estimated their brigades and soldiered on in the ruin, the Ukrainians had an such easy amount of recruits. (Mr. Prigozhin pulled his rebels back from Rostov-on-Don, two months later, but he died in a plane crash. Both American intelligence believed had the hallmarks of a Vladimir-sponsored assassination.)

**WHEN LATE** Melitopol

A primary virtue of the Wiesbaden machine was speed — shrinking the time from point of interest to Ukrainian strike. But that virtue, and with it the Melitopol offensive, was undermined by Russian jamming. Mr. Putin's Russian commander-them-and-place pieces of interest. He had ordered substantially less ammunition than he had planned for, instead of simply firing, he would have his case dozens to confirm the intelligence.

This corrosive pattern, Ashell, ran, by caution and a deficit of trust, came to a head when, after weeks of grindingly slow progress across a Melitopol of minefields and helicopter fire, Ukrainian forces finally reached the Sea of Azov, on June 26.

American officials recounted the ensuing battle. The Ukrainians had been pummeling the Russians with artillery. American intelligence indicated they were pulling back.

"Take the ground now," General Agata told General Tarnavsky.

But the Ukrainians had spotted a group of Russians on a hilltop.

In Wiesbaden, satellite imagery showed what looked like a Russian platoon, between 20 and 30 soldiers — to General Agata-Sarby justification to slow the march.

General Tarnavsky, though, wouldn't move until the threat was eliminated. In Wiesbaden and the Russians' sentiments and derived him to simultaneously open fire and advance.

Instead, to verify the intelligence, General Tarnavsky flew helicopter reconnaissance himself.

Which took time. Only then did he order his men to fire.

And after the strike, he once again dispatched his drones, to confirm the killing was needed close. Then he ordered his forces into Robotyne, which they seized on Aug. 26.

The back-and-forth had cost between 5 and 6 hours, officers estimated. And at that time, south of Robotyne, the Russians had dug in, and Ukrainian officials said, Russian military reinforcements to halt Ukrainian progress. "The situation was changed completely," General Zaluzhny said.

General Agata (left) and General Tarnavsky's. Brass on. But the Ukrainian had to retain troops from the front lines to the rear, and with only the seven brigades, they weren't able to bring in new forces fast enough to keep going.

The Ukrainian advance, in fact, was slowed by a mix of factors. But at Wiesbaden, the frustrated Americans kept talking about the "Services of our morale." Ukrainian officials regarded the counteroffensive," one officer remarked.

**THE UKRAINIANS** would not make it to Melitopol. They would have to scale back their ambitions.

Now their objective would be the small occupied city of Tokmak, about halfway to Melitopol, close to critical rail lines and roadways.

General Agata had given the Ukrainians greater autonomy. But now he crafted a detailed military plan, Operation Rolling Thunder, which would have the Ukrainian Army, with the Wiesbaden, Kyiv, and what units, according to U.S. and Ukrainian officials, that General Tarnavsky objected to some targets, insisted on using drones to verify points of interest and Rolling Thunder combined in a lab.

Desperate to salvage the counteroffensive, the White House had authorized the transfer of cluster munitions, which Ukraine stockpiles with a range of about 100 miles, and General Agata and General Zaluzhny derived an operation against Russian attack helicopters threatening General Tarnavsky's forces. In least 10 helicopters were destroyed, and the Russians pulled all their helicopters back from the contested field, the Ukrainian couldn't advance.

The Americans' laid-dirth recommendation was to have General Syrsky take over the Tokmak fight. That was rejected. They then proposed that General Sobol send his marines to Robotyne and Tokmak, and that General Syrsky, with the Ukrainian Army, Zaluzhny ordered the marines to Bereian to open a new front in an operation the Americans counsel was doomed to fail — trying to cross the Dnipro and advance toward Crimea. The marines made it across the river in early November but ran out of men and ammunition and were pushed back and evacuated in knockout form. Instead, it was an inglorious end.

General Syrsky declined to answer questions about his interactions with American generals, but a spokesman for the Ukrainian armed forces said, "We do hope that the time will come, and after the war, we will be able to sit down and have a friendly conversation mentioned will perhaps jointly tell us about their working and friendly negotiations during the fighting against Russian aggression."

Andry Yermak, head of the presidential office of Ukraine and arguably the country's second-most powerful official, told The Times that the counteroffensive had been "primarily blamed by the U.S. military, political factionist" and "restrained" Ukraine in weapons deliveries.

But in another senior Ukrainian official, "The real reason why we were not successful was because an important number of forces were assigned to crescent the plan."

Either way, for the partners, the counteroffensive's devastating outcome left frustrated feelings on both sides. "The important thing is we tried to do it together," said Mr. Zaluzhny, the Ukrainian official. "That is no longer the congenial and trusting brotherhood of 2022 and early 2023."

Ukraine

Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Commander-in-Chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi, Kyiv, January 2023. Ukrainian Presidential Office

Part 2

## Breaches of Trust, and of Borders

**SHORTLY BEFORE CHRISTMAS,** Mr. Zelenskyy rode through the Washington gates for his maiden visit to the secret center of the partnership.

Entering the Tony Blair Auditorium, he was escorted past trophies of shared battle — related fragments of Russian vehicles, missile tubes, and, of course, the Wiesbaden Wolverine, the mascot of basketball team — as General Dodd recalled down that first day in 2022 — the officers working below burst into applause.

For the president had not come to Wiesbaden for celebration. In the shadow of the failed counteroffensive, a third, April wartime winter was coming, and Ukraine was in a precarious position. To its advantage, the Russian war-making forces into the east. In America, Mr. Trump, a likeliest despite, was mid-political resurrection, some congressional Republicans were grumbling about cutting off funding.

A year ago, the coalition had been talking victory. In 2024 arrived and ground on, the Biden administration would find itself forced to begin asking its own ally Ukraine to keep the Ukrainian offensive alive.

But first, the immediate business in Wiesbaden: Generals Corrado and Agata explained that they saw no plausible path to reclaiming significant territory in 2023. The coalition simply couldn't provide the Ukrainian Army with the ammunition it needed. The Ukrainian build an army big enough to mount one.

The Ukrainians would have to temper expectations, focusing on achievable objectives to stay in the fight while building the combat power to potentially mount a counteroffensive in 2025. They would need to conserve their forces, pulling back units and brigades from raining more territory, And they would need to reconstitute existing brigades and fill new ones, which the coalition would help train and equip.

Mr. Zelenskyy voiced his support.

Yet the Americans knew he did so grudgingly. Time and again Mr. Zelenskyy had made a clear that he wanted, and needed, a big win to bolster morale at home and shore up Western support.

Just weeks before, the president had intervened General Zaluzhny, ordering the Ukrainian Army to launch a counteroffensive in the east. The general had then shuttled the Americans by pressuring a plan to do so that required five million shells and one million drones. To which General Corrado had responded, in Sweet Russian, "Sorry."

Several weeks later, at meeting in Kyiv, the Ukrainian commander had hinted General Corrado at a Ukrainian Ministry kitchen and, tapping furiously, made his case that, before Jan. 1, "We caught between two fires, the Ukrainian people would be angry that we secured being the partners," said one of his aides.

Ukrainian officials had been frustrated with Mr. Zelenskyy with Zelenskyy had made it clear that he wanted, and needed, a big win to bolster morale at home and shore up Western support.

Just weeks before, the president had intervened General Zaluzhny, ordering the Ukrainian Army to launch a counteroffensive in the east. The general had then shuttled the Americans by pressuring a plan to do so that required five million shells and one million drones. To which General Corrado had responded, in Sweet Russian, "Sorry."

Several weeks later, at meeting in Kyiv, the Ukrainian commander had hinted General Corrado at a Ukrainian Ministry kitchen and, tapping furiously, made his case that, before Jan. 1, "We caught between two fires, the Ukrainian people would be angry that we secured being the partners," said one of his aides.

Ukrainian officials had been frustrated with Mr. Zelenskyy with

**GENERAL CARROWAY** was in the Wiesbaden command center in late January when he received an urgent message and stepped outside.

When he returned, gone pale at a glance, he led General Agnew to a quiet corner of the base. The two men had been in a bitter leadership struggle had reached its denouement. General Zabalotsky was being fired. The betting was on his rival, General Kyrylo, to succeed.

The Americans were hardly surprised; they had been hearing rumors of Zabalotsky's dismissal for weeks. But the timing would shake up matters, in fact that the widely popular General Zabalotsky might challenge Mr. Zelensky for the presidency. There was also the Kursk evening, where the premature effectively kneecapped General Zabalotsky, and the general's subsequent disappearance from the front. Mr. Zelensky had ordered him to a quarantine, the Zabalotsky fire need of a precipitous rechoreograph breakthrough. This even so he presumed was calling for total victory.

General Zabalotsky, one American official said, was a "dead man walking."

General Kyrylo's appointment brought hedged relief. The Ukrainian leadership, the Americans hoped, would be "focused on president's war aims" decision-making, they hoped, would become more consistent.

General Kyrylo was also a known commodity.

Part of that knowledge, of course, was the memory of 2015, the year of Debaltsevo — the way the general had sometimes spurned their recommendations, even sought to undermine them. Still, Ukrainian officials said, he was a tough, hard-nosed, unsentimental abnoxious/ness, he would at least hold them out, and unlike some commanders, he appreciated and typically treated the intelligence they provided.

For General Zabalotsky's, though, the shake-up was a personal blow. Ukrainian officials said he had been increasingly isolated (and had given up his parliamentary) and to become his deputy. Key plans and operations. (Soon he would be pushed out of that job, and his Wiesbaden role. When General Agnew heard out, he called with a standing invitation to his North Carolina beach house, the Ukrainian officials said. "Maybe in my next life," the general Zabalotsky replied.)

And the changing of the guard came at a particularly uncertain moment for the prosecutorship. Guarded by Mr. Trump, congressional Republicans were building up $61 billion in new military aid. During the Biden years, Republicans had accumulated a long list of demands to cudgeon every grain of interest. Now, with the fewer rockets and shells, commentators along the front adopted the same protocol. Wiesbaden was still churning out grains of interest, but the Ukrainians were barely using them.

"We don't need this right now" General Zabalotsky's old the Americans.

**THE RED LINES** kept moving.

There were the ATACMS, which arrived secretly in early spring, so the Russians wouldn't realize Ukraine could now strike across their rear.

And there were the GMLRs. Some months earlier, General Agnew had been allowed to send a small team, about a dozen officers, to Kyiv, easing the prohibition on American boots on Ukrainian ground. So as not to evoke memories of the American military occupation of Iraq, the team was called a "liaison team" and its work would be known as "subject matter experts." There, after the Ukrainian leadership shake-up, to build confidence and reassurance, the team was joined by a small, but significant number of officers in Kyiv, to about three dozen; they could now plainly be seen in streets, though they would still be confined to the Kyiv area.

Perhaps the hardest red line, though, was the Russian border. Soon that too, was troubled no more.

In April, the financing logjam was finally cleared, and 20 more ATACMS, dozens of artillery rockets and 20,000 155-millimeter shells started flowing, Ukrainian officials said.

Wiesbaden's attitude, though, was distorting another sort of movement. Component of a new Russian formation, the 60th Army Corps, moving toward Belgorod, just north of the Ukrainian border. The Russians, seeing a limited window as the Ukrainians waited to have the American aid in hand, were preparing to open a new front in Ukraine's northeast.

The Ukrainians believed the Russians hoped to reach a tender-vail ringing Kharkiv, which would allow them to bombard the city, the country's second largest, with artillery fire, and threaten the Iron of more than a million people.

The Russian offensive explained a fundamental asymmetry: The Russians could support their troops with artillery from just across the border, but Ukraine's soldiers' chest-back using American equipment or intelligence.

Yet with pitch-pine opportunity, The Russians were complacent about security, believing the Americans would never let the Ukrainians fire into Russia. Entire units and their equipment were sitting unobstructed, largely unobstructed, in open fields.

The Ukrainians asked for permission to use U.S.-supplied weapons against the Russian forces, the officials said, and Washington proposed that Washington help guide those strikes, as it did across Ukraine and in Crimea — providing points of interest and precision coordinates.

The White House was still debating these questions when, on May 10, the Russians attacked.

This became the moment the Biden administration changed the rules of the war, allowing Kyiv to use American weapons to strike existing an "open box" — a zone on Russian soil in which the Ukrainians could fire U.S.-supplied weapons and Washington could support their strikes.

At first they advocated an expansive box, to encompass a Russian formation, the 60th Army Corps, that had suddenly transformed into precision weapons with wings and fire — that were coming terror at Kharkiv. A box extending about 100 miles south from the Ukrainian city there were ATACMS to hit depots hotels and other targets deep inside Russia. But Mr. Austin saw this as a dangerous creep. He did not want to divert ATACMS from Lunar Ukraine.

Instead, the generals were instructed to draw up two options — one extending about 30 miles into Russia, standard HIMARS range, and one nearly twice as deep. Ultimately, against the Ukrainian recommendation, Mr. Austin chose the shallower box, more limited option — but to protect the city of Sumy as well as Kharkiv, it followed most of the country's northern borders, encompassing an area almost as large as New Jersey. The U.S. was also authorized to send officers to the Kharkiv region to assist Ukraine's military operations, the officials said, in Kyiv.

The box went live at the end of May. The Russian were caught unawares. With Washington's points of interest and coordinates, as well as the Ukrainians' own intelligence, HIMARS strikes into the ops box helped defeat Kharkiv. The Russians suffered some of their heaviest casualties of the war.

The antebellum had lasted over. The United States was now deep into the fitting of Russian soldiers on stereotype Russian ground.

**SUMMER 2024** — Ukraine's actions in the north and east were stretched dangerously thin. Still, General Syrsky kept telling the Americans, "I need a win."

A foreshadowing had come back in March, when the Americans had learned of Ukrainian plans to attack Crimea by sea. The idea was hatefully planning a ground operation into southern Russia. The C.I.A. station did in Kyiv confirmed the HUR commander, Gen. Kyrylo Budanov ("If he crossed into Russia, he would be on without American weapons or intelligence support. He did, only to be forced to leave.

At moments like these, Biden administration officials would plot with Mr. Zelensky and talk about what the Ukrainians were planning by opening up them about what their Ukrainian partners were planning.

In the Ukrainians, though, "don't ask, don't tell" was "better than ask and stop," explained Lt. Gen. Vitaliy Korotkyeich, a former Ukrainian military intelligence officer. Ukraine, he said, "is not allies, but we have different goals. We protect our country, and you protect your phantom fears from the Cold War."

In August in Wiesbaden, General Agnew's tour was coming to its scheduled end. He left on the 5th. The same day, the Ukrainians stepped a cryptic reference to something happening in the north.

On Aug. 10, the C.I.A. station chief left, too, for a job at headquarters. The station had been preparing for this made his move — sending troops across the southwest Russian border, into the region of Kursk.

For the Americans, the incursion's unfolding was a significant breach of trust. It wasn't just that the Ukrainians had again kept secrets, it was that the secrecy had prevented Washington from upon him, taking coalition-supplied equipment into Russian territory overmatched by the ops box, in violation of rules laid down when it was created.

The box had been established to prevent a humanitarian disaster in Kharkiv; not so the Ukrainians could take advantage of it to seize Russian soil. "It wasn't about Shacksaid, it was Shacksaid," a senior Biden administration official said.

The Americans could have pulled the plug on the ops box. Yet they knew that to do so, an administration official explained, "could lead to a counterpoint": Ukrainian soldiers in Kursk would perish unprotected by HIMARS rockets and U.S. intelligence.

Kursk, the Americans concluded, was the war. Mr. Zelensky had been hoping, all along. It was also evidence of his calculation: Ukraine was fighting for its life, and the Americans could be explained to the Americans, was leverage — to capture and hold Russian land that could be traded for Ukrainian land in future negotiations.

**PROVOCATIVE OPERATIONS** were forbidden were now permitted. Before General Zabalotsky was sidelined, he and General Agnew had discussed a Ukrainian commando raid. The Ukrainian leadership requested a degree of hand-holding and were since General Zanatian's day. American and British officers would oversee virtually every aspect of such strikes, from determining the coordinates to calculating the moonlight flight paths.

Ukraine's Special Forces Command, the commando unit was the Berch Brook Bridge linking the peninsula to the Russian mainland. Mr. Putin uses the bridge as powerful physical proof of Crimea's connection to the motherland. Toppling the Russian president's symbol had, to wry, become the Ukrainian president's obsession.

It had also been an American red line. In 2022, the Biden administration prohibited helping the Ukrainians target it, even as Ukrainian forces were using American-supplied weapons to recover Russian territory (a Ukrainian intelligence services tried attacking it themselves, causing some damage.)

But after the patterns agreed on Lunar Dial, the White House authorized the military and C.I.A. to secretly work with the Ukrainians to plan a strike on the bridge. Ukrainian officials said bridge down. ATACMS would weaken vulnerable points on the deck, while maritime drones would blow up once to its mauchers.

But while the drones were being readied, the Russians learned of their defenses around the mauchers.

The Ukrainians proposed attacking with ATACMS allies. Generals Carroll and Agnew pushed back. ATACMS allow wouldn't do the job; the Ukrainians should wait until the drones were ready or call off the strikes.

In the end, the American stood down, and in mid-August, with Wiesbaden's reluctant help, the Ukrainians fired a volley of ATACMS at the bridge. It did not cause tumbling down, the strike was a dud. The Ukrainians had underestimated the Russian defenses, the official said, adding, "Sometimes they need to try and fail to learn what we right."

The Berch Bridge episode aside, the Lunar Dial collaboration was judged a significant success. Russian warships, aircraft, command posts, weapons depots and maintenance facilities were destroyed or moved to the mainland to escape the onslaught.

The Ukrainian commandos, working with the Americans, together with a cavarty of ATACMS, reinforced the importance of helping the Ukrainians use their fleet of long-distance attack drones. The main challenge was evading Russian air defenses and pinpointing targets.

Longstanding policy barred the C.I.A. from providing intelligence on targets on Russian soil. So the administration would let the C.I.A. "provide the Ukrainians with information on how to operate in support strikes inside Russia to achieve specific objectives.

Intelligence had identified a vast munitions depot in the lakeside town of Tempest, some 250 miles north of the Ukrainian border, that was providing weapons to Russian forces in Kharkiv and Kursk. The administration approved the variance. Tempest would be a test of concept.

C.I.A. officers shared intelligence about the depot's munitions and vulnerabilities, as well as Russian defense systems on the way to Tempest. They calculated how many drones the operation would require and charted their circuitous flight path.

On Sept. 14, a large swarm of drones slammed into the munitions depot. The Ukrainian drones had been disguised to look like corpse-like wrecks of a football field. Videos showed hundreds bulb of flame and plumes of smoke rising above the tabs.

Ukrainian drones at Tempest, August 2024. Video, Ukraine

Yet as with the Berch Bridge operation, the drone collaboration potential as a strategic disassembly.

The Americans argued for concentrating drone strikes on strategically important military targets — the same sort of argument they had made, fruitlessly, about focusing on Melitopol and Crimea. The Ukrainians had been using American intelligence attacking a wider menu of targets, including oil and gas facilities and politically sensitive sites in and around Moscow (though they would do so without C.I.A. help).

"Russian public opinion is going to turn on Putin," Mr. Zelensky told the American secretary of state, Antony Blinken, in Kyiv in September. "You're wrong. We know the Russians."

**MR. AUSTIN AND GENERAL CARROW** traveled to Kyiv in October. Their trip was a show of support for Ukraine's military, which was ending with an ever-more-sophisticated arsenal of weaponry, but created so many of its red lines. Still, the defense secretary and the general came to Kyiv to deliver the message written in the weakening situation on the ground.

The Russians had been making slow but steady progress against depleted Ukrainian forces in the east, toward the city of Toretsk — their "big target," one American official called it. They were also clawing back some territory in Kursk, the Ukrainian incursion had spiked, to between 1,000 and 1,200 a day. But still they kept pushing forward.

Mr. Austin would have vetoed how he contemplated this manpower mismatch as he looked out the window of his armored U.S.V. cruising through the Kyiv streets. He was struck, he told aides, by the sight of so many men in their 20s, almost none of them in uniform. "Where are they?" he asked, as he explained, since this age sets usually array in the fight.

This was one of the difficult messages the Americans had come to Kyiv to deliver, so they laid out what they could and couldn't do for Ukraine in 2025.

Mr. Zelensky had already taken a small step, lowering the draft age to 25. Still, the Ukrainians hadn't been able to fill existing brigades, let alone build new ones.

Mr. Austin pressed Mr. Zelensky to take the biggest, bolder step and lower the draft age to 18. Mr. Zelensky refused, saying, according to an official who was present, "Why would I draft more people? We don't have any equipment to give them."

"And your generals are reporting that your units are undermanned," the official recalled Mr. Austin responding. "They don't have enough soldiers for the equipment they have."

That was the personal standoff.

Mr. Zelensky said the Ukrainian forces weren't willing to do what was necessary to bring them around.

In the Americans' view, the Ukrainian weren't willing to do what was necessary to help themselves prevail.

Mr. Zelensky often said, in response to the draft question, that his country was fighting for its future, that 18- to 20-year-olds were the fathers of that future.

To one American official, though, it's "not an existential war if they won't make their people fight."

**GENERAL BALDWIN**, who early on had crucially helped connect the Ukrainian leadership with the Biden administration, left in the counterofensive was ending, the U.S. elections were on the horizon and the Ukrainians kept asking about Afghanistan.

The Ukrainians, he recalled, were terrified that they, too, would be abandoned. They kept calling, wanting to know if America would stay the course, asking: "What will happen if the Republicans win the Congress? What is going to happen if President Trump wins?"

Ukrainian officials had been preparing for that, he said, for added, "I had my fingers crossed behind my back, because I really didn't know anyone."

Mr. Trump won, and the four came rushing in.

In his turn, Jason Kick wrote, Mr. Biden made a flurry of moves to lock in the war, at least for the moment, and shore up the Ukrainian project.

He crossed his final red line — expanding the ops box to allow ATACMS and British Storm Shadow strikes into Russia — after Ukraine used the weapons to hit a Russian ammunition warehouse the Ukrainians from Kursk. One of the first U.S.-supported strikes targeted and wounded the North Korean commander, Col. Gen. Kim Yong Bok, in his stay with his Russian counterparts in a command bunker.

The administration also authorized Wiesbaden and the C.I.A. to support long-range missile and drone strikes into a section of southern Russia and as a staging area for the assault on Pokrovsk, and delivered the military advisers to learn Kyiv command posts closer to the fighting.

In December, General Donahue got his fourth year and returned to Wiesbaden as commander of U.S. Army Europe and Africa. He had to deal with the Ukrainian leadership, which was now in Kursk. Now he would have to navigate the new, uneasy liaison of Ukraine.

Ukrainian drones at Tempest, August 2024. Video, Ukraine

General Cavoli, center, passed the colors to General Donahue in a ceremonial change of command in Wiesbaden. Volker Ramspott/U.S. Army

So much had changed since General Donahue left two years before. But when it came to the raw question of territory, not much had changed. In the war's first year, with Wiesbaden's help, the Ukrainians had seized the upper hand, winning back more than half of the land lost after the 2022 invasion. Now, they were fighting over tiny slivers of ground in the east (and in Kursk).

One of General Donahue's main objectives in Wiesbaden, according to a Pentagon official, would be to fortify the brotherhood and breathe new life into the machine — to stem, perhaps even push back, the Russian advance. (In the weeks that followed, with Wiesbaden providing points of interest and coordinates, the Russian march toward Pokrovsk would slow, and in some areas in the east, the Ukrainians would make gains. But in southwest Russia, as the Trump administration scaled back support, the Ukrainians would lose most of their bargaining chip, Kursk.)

In early January, Generals Donahue and Cavoli visited Kyiv to meet with General Syrsky and ensure that he agreed on plans to replenish Ukrainian brigades and shore up their lines, the Pentagon official said. From there, they traveled to Ramstein Air Base, where they met Mr. Austin for what would be the final gathering of coalition defense chiefs before everything changed.

With the doors closed to the press and public, Mr. Austin's counterparts hailed him as the "godfather" and "architect" of the partnership that, for all its broken trust and betrayals, had sustained the Ukrainians' defiance and hope, begun in earnest on that spring day in 2022 when Generals Donahue and Zabrodskyi first met in Wiesbaden.

Mr. Austin is a solid and stoic block of a man, but as he returned the compliments, his voice caught.

"Instead of saying farewell, let me say thank you," he said, blinking back tears. And then added: "I wish you all success, courage and resolve. Ladies and gentlemen, carry on."

Oleksandr Chubko and Julie Tate contributed research. Produced by Gray Beltran, Kenan Davis and Rumsey Taylor. Maps by Leanne Abraham. Additional production by William B. Davis. Audio produced by Adrienne Hurst.

**Sources and methodology**

For each war map, we used data from the Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project to calculate changes in territorial control. Russian forces in eastern Ukraine include Russian-backed separatists. The composite image in the introduction draws on data from NASA's Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer (MODIS) and was compiled using Google Earth Engine. We combined images from January and February of each year since 2020 to generate a cloud-free satellite image.

ADVERTISEMENT

See more on: Russia-Ukraine War, U.S. Politics, National Intelligence Estimates, U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Intelligence Agency, Joint Chiefs of Staff

READ 1491 COMMENTS

Share full article 1.5K

ADVERTISEMENT