

U.S. Helsinki Commission

Intercepting Terror:

Strengthening Ukrainian Air Defense

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today alongside my distinguished fellow panelists.

Our topic couldn't be more timely or important.

Despite President Trump's repeated calls on Putin to "stop," Ukraine continues to face a relentless assault both on the ground and through the air.

Putin apparently still clings to the hope that he can break Ukraine's resistance and outlast Western will.

I have no doubt the Ukrainians will continue to prove him wrong. And they continue to find new ways to surprise the world with their ingenuity, such as Operation Spiderweb, which dealt a gut punch to Russian Long-Range Aviation.

But Ukraine needs our help.

After all, Russia isn't fighting alone — but with key support from its authoritarian friends in Beijing, Pyongyang, and Tehran.

Relentless Russian Barrage

The past few months have seen Ukraine's air and missile defense capacity, already in short supply, get stretched even further.

Despite Western sanctions, Russia has steadily expanded its production of ballistic and cruise missiles¹ and Shahed-type one-way attack drones,² in large part thanks to supplies of components and machinery from China.

Meanwhile, North Korea continues to supply Russia with KN-23 ballistic missiles,³ which have become more accurate thanks to Moscow's assistance.⁴

Russia has engaged in tactical and technical adaptation with its Shahed-type drones to counter Ukraine's cost-effective mobile fire groups and electronic warfare. As a result, not only is Russia

¹ Kollen Post, "Exclusive: Russia's ballistic missile production up at least 66% over past year, according to Ukrainian intel figures," *The Kyiv Independent* (Ukraine), June 3, 2025. (<https://kyivindependent.com/exclusive-russias-ballistic-missile-production-up-at-least-66-over-past-year-according-to-ukrainian-intel-figures>)

² Kollen Post, "Exclusive: Ukraine could face 500+ Russian drones a night as Kremlin builds new launch sites," *The Kyiv Independent* (Ukraine), June 4, 2025. (<https://kyivindependent.com/exclusive-ukraine-could-face-500-russian-drones-a-night-as-kremlin-builds-new-launch-sites>); Uliana Bezpalko and Vladyslava Kovalenko, "Russia capable of 500 drone strikes daily, intel says," *RBC-Ukraine* (Ukraine), June 21, 2025. (<https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/russia-capable-of-500-drone-strikes-daily-1750501679.html>)

³ Howard Altman, "More North Korean Artillery Troops Heading To Russia: Ukraine Intel Chief," *The War Zone*, January 22, 2025. (<https://www.twz.com/news-features/more-north-korean-artillery-troops-heading-to-russia-ukraine-intel-chief>)

⁴ Tom Balmforth, "Exclusive: Ukraine sees marked improvement in accuracy of Russia's North Korean missiles," *Reuters*, February 6, 2025. (<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/ukraine-sees-marked-improvement-accuracy-russias-north-korean-missiles-2025-02-06>)

now launching more of these drones, but a higher percentage are getting through.⁵ And they force Ukraine to expend precious surface-to-air missiles.

In recent weeks and months, Russia has repeatedly broken its own gruesome records for the most projectiles launched in a single night. Ukrainian civilians have paid the price. According to UN data, almost 1,000 civilians were killed or injured in the first half of July alone.⁶

In addition to attacking critical infrastructure and Ukrainian civilians, Russia's current strike campaign aims to undermine Ukraine's war effort. One recent example is a strike on a Ukrainian drone company that's working with the U.S. Defense Innovation Unit's Project Artemis⁷ — a poignant demonstration that what happens in Ukraine has security implications for the United States.

Bolstering Ukraine's Air Defenses

So, what can we do?

First, we need to put meat on the bones of the recent pledges to transfer German Patriots to Ukraine, backfilled by the United States. And this new aid mechanism shouldn't be limited to Patriots. It should also be used for other materiel, including munitions for Ukraine's other air defense capabilities.

If these arms are to reach Ukraine in a timely manner, we may have to accept a little short-term risk with our stocks, understanding that Ukraine is the one currently in the fight and is actively degrading the Russian military threat. As my FDD colleagues have argued, this risk is manageable and can be mitigated through investment in maximal U.S. production.⁸

In addition, as my colleague Mark Montgomery argued after a recent trip to Ukraine, the United States should help Kyiv integrate APKWS II rockets with its F-16s to counter Shahed-type drones,⁹ much as American F-16s and F-15s have recently been doing in the Middle East.¹⁰ Earlier this summer, the Pentagon diverted to the Middle East fuzes for these rockets that had

⁵ Emma Burrows, "Drone debris found in Ukraine indicates Russia is using new technology from Iran," *Associated Press*, June 25, 2025. (<https://apnews.com/article/russia-iran-drones-shahed-ukraine-israel-strikes-3ddeb853845f0ea5f81878165af07bfd>)

⁶ "Ukraine: Civilians under fire in record numbers as attacks surge," *United Nations*, July 15, 2025. (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/07/1165397>)

⁷ Courtney Albon, "Jammed and confused: Alaska trial shows pitfalls of fielding US drones," *Defense News*, July 15, 2025. (<https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2025/07/15/jammed-and-confused-alaska-trial-shows-pitfalls-of-fielding-us-drones>)

⁸ Ryan Brobst, Cameron McMillan, and Bradley Bowman, "Can the U.S. Arm Itself and Ukraine?" *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, July 15, 2025. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/07/15/can-the-u-s-arm-itself-and-ukraine>)

⁹ Mark Montgomery and Charles Corcan, "We're training Ukraine's brave F-16 pilots — here's what they need to keep fighting," *New York Post*, May 29, 2025. (<https://nypost.com/2025/05/29/opinion/were-training-ukraines-f-16-pilots-what-they-need-now>)

¹⁰ Joseph Trevithick, "Laser-Guided Rockets Shown Shooting Down Houthi Drones For First Time," *The War Zone*, March 19, 2025. (<https://www.twz.com/air/air-launched-laser-guided-rockets-shown-shooting-down-houthi-drones-for-first-time>)

been procured for Ukraine.¹¹ With the Iran-Israel war now over, the Pentagon and Congress should reassess the quantities needed in the Central Command area of responsibility and send as many as possible to Ukraine.

Moreover, Western countries should provide funding for Ukrainian companies to scale up production of promising new capabilities such as counter-Shahed FPV drones and automatic anti-aircraft turrets like the Sky Sentinel. Europe has recently taken a good first step on this front,¹² but more funding is needed.¹³ And any Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI) funding that's been committed but not yet put on contract should be obligated as soon as possible.¹⁴

To create maximal leverage over Putin, the Trump administration should also tap its remaining Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA) for Ukraine and ask Congress for a "Ukraine Leverage Package" that provides additional PDA replacement and USAI funding.¹⁵ This could be used in part to bolster Ukraine's air defenses.

Both Offense and Defense

But Ukraine shouldn't be restricted merely to shooting down "arrows." It'll always be hard to make that math work, particularly for ballistic missile defense.

An optimal approach will combine both offense and defense. Ukraine needs to be able to hit the "archer" — and the factories that make the "arrows."

Although Ukraine has struck many Russian military, military-industrial, and energy sites with indigenous long-range drones, most of these drones are neutralized by Russian air defenses and electronic warfare. And they carry small warheads, making it difficult to cripple major factories.

More ATACMS, Storm Shadow, and SCALP missiles would be a good start. But what Ukraine really needs is longer-range capabilities to hit key missile and drone factories deeper in Russia.

This could include missiles such as the Tomahawk. Notably, the U.S. Marine Corps wants to cancel its new Long Range Fires (LRF) system designed to launch Tomahawks. So, we'll now

¹¹ Howard Altman, "Counter-Drone Weapons Diverted From Ukraine To Middle East Amid Rising Tensions, Hegseth Confirms," *The War Zone*, June 11, 2025. (<https://www.twz.com/news-features/counter-drone-weapons-diverted-from-ukraine-to-middle-east-amid-rising-tensions-hegseth-confirms>)

¹² Kateryna Shkarlat, "Patriot systems and F-16 support among highlights of Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting," *RBC-Ukraine* (Ukraine), July 21, 2025. (<https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/patriot-systems-and-f-16-support-among-highlights-1753114923.html>)

¹³ Tetyana Vysotska and Stanislav Pohorilov, "New defence minister says Ukraine needs US\$6bn to buy weapons and take war back to Russia," *Ukrainska Pravda* (Ukraine), July 21, 2025. (<https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2025/07/21/7522766>)

¹⁴ For information on the unobligated funding as of December 2024, see: U.S. Department of Defense, Infographic, "Ukraine Security Assistance," December 19, 2024. (<https://media.defense.gov/2025/Jan/08/2003626039/-1/-1/0/UKRAINE-INFOGRAPHIC-19DEC2024.PDF>)

¹⁵ John Hardie, "How Trump Should Answer Putin's Foot-Dragging," *Civitas Institute at The University of Texas at Austin*, April 29, 2025. (https://www.fdd.org/analysis/op_ed/2025/04/29/how-trump-should-answer-putins-foot-dragging)

have a handful of these systems left over,¹⁶ which could be given to Kyiv. With the Tomahawk, Ukraine could hit targets such as the plants producing Russia's "Geran" and "Garpiya" Shahed-type drones, which are both more than 1,000 kilometers away.

Squeezing Russia's War Machine

Finally, a quick word about sanctions and export controls.

While they have certainly proven to be an imperfect tool, they do make it harder and more expensive for Russia's military-industrial base to acquire key components and machinery.

Russia sanctions enforcement packages should be — and indeed used to be — routine. But since taking office, the Trump administration hasn't issued a single one. As a result, the Russia sanctions regime has atrophied.

This is hardly the time to be making life easier for Russia's war machine. And we need to combine enhanced enforcement of defense-related restrictions with comprehensive pressure on the Russian economy, especially its oil revenue.

Conclusion

President Trump's objective of peace in Ukraine is the right one.

But Putin will continue his unprovoked war so long as he believes it's sustainable and offers a pathway to achieving his goals. Ultimately, U.S. aid for Ukraine is more sustainable than Russia's war.¹⁷

By shoring up Ukraine's defense of its skies and enabling Ukraine to inflict growing costs on Russia's war machine, as well as pressuring the Russian economy and exhausting Russia's offensive potential on the ground, we may be able to change that calculus.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

¹⁶ Carter Johnston, "U.S. Marine Corps Abandons Tomahawk Missiles, Doubles Down on Extended Range NMEIS in FY2026 Budget," *Naval News*, June 27, 2025. (<https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/06/u-s-marine-corps-abandons-tomahawk-missiles-doubles-down-on-extended-range-nmesis-in-fy2026-budget>)

¹⁷ Cameron McMillan, Ryan Brobst, and Bradley Bowman, "U.S. Aid to Ukraine Is More Sustainable Than Putin's Invasion," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 10, 2025. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2025/03/10/u-s-aid-to-ukraine-is-more-sustainable-than-putins-invasion>)