Supporting Ukraine's Defense Today, Tomorrow, and in the Future

October 14, 2025
Featuring Admiral Ihor Voronchenko, Col (Ret.) Andy Bain, Maj Gen (Ret.) Charles Corcoran, and RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery
Moderated by Tara Copp
Introductory remarks by ADM (Ret.) Lisa Franchetti

FRANCHETTI: Welcome, and thank you for joining us for today's event, hosted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

I'm ADM (Ret.) Lisa Franchetti, former Chief of Naval Operations and Commander of the U.S. Sixth Fleet. It's Tuesday, October 14th, and today's panel will discuss the recent developments in Ukraine. We're pleased to have you here for this conversation, some in person, some tuning in live, and some listening to our podcast.

The latest twist of fate in Russia's war on Ukraine, precipitated by President Trump's comments in New York, underscores the drastically changed narrative of this ongoing conflict. The Trump administration is considering improved intelligence and weapons support for Ukraine, including long-range cruise missiles, and is calling for increased tariffs on nations that buy Russian energy.

This was preceded by Russian drone violations of NATO airspace, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, which led Ukraine to propose a joint air and missile defense network with European partners.

What kind of support could, or should Washington provide? What would the integration of Ukraine into European air defense networks look like? And what type of reform is needed to prepare Ukraine for integration into Western security architectures?

To discuss these complex issues, we are joined by an expert lineup today.

Admiral Ihor Voronchenko is the former inspector general of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, and commanded the naval forces of Ukraine, where I had the opportunity to work with him as the commander of U.S. Sixth Fleet. I still remember back in 2019 we celebrated Ukrainian Navy Day together in Odessa, touring a brand new jointly built maritime operations center, paying tribute to brave fallen sailors, and briefing the newly elected President Zelenskyy on the multilateral exercise Sea Breeze and Ihor's strategic plan for the Navy.

It's his bold and visionary leadership that laid the foundation for a strong, resilient, innovative maritime force, and the many successes it has achieved over the past three and a half years. Earlier, he served as the naval forces acting commander and deputy head for coastal defense, as well as head of personnel directorate for the general staff of Ukraine.

A venerated war hero, throughout his 39-year military career he served in assignments across Crimea, Germany, and Belarus, and held various positions in the National Guard, including commanding officer of the 7th National Guard Division. He retired in January of 2025.

Retired Colonel Andy Bain is the executive director and co-founder of Ukraine Freedom Fund, which simulates volunteerism across Ukrainian civil society and covers shortfalls in national security logistics and administrative structures.

He serves as chairman for Liquid Technology and NAKO — Independent Committee on Defense and Anti-Corruption, as well as an Advisory Board Member for the Manxman Group LLC.

Bain was one of the early founders of the advertising and media industries in Ukraine and has lived and worked in Kyiv since 1992 after founding Atlantic Group Limited. He retired as a colonel from the United States Marine Corps Reserve.

Maj Gen (Ret.) Charles "Corky" Corcoran is the former chief of staff for the U.S. Air Forces Central Command and the former assistant deputy chief of staff for Operations for Headquarters U.S. Air Force. He commanded the 525th Fighter Squadron, the 325th Operations Group, the 3rd Wing, and the 380th Air Expeditionary Wing.

He served as executive assistant to the vice chief of staff of the Air Force and in the secretary of the Air Force and chief of staff for the Air Force Executive Action Group. He served in the Headquarters staff of NATO's Allied Air Command, U.S. Air Forces Europe, and Air Forces Africa.

Rounding out our panel is RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery, senior director of FDD's Center on Cyber and Technology Innovation. He also directs CSC 2.0, having served as Cyberspace Solarium Commission's executive director.

Previously, Mark served as policy director for the Senate Armed Services Committee, coordinating policy efforts on national security strategy, capabilities, requirements, and cyber policy. Mark served for 32 years in the U.S. Navy as a nuclear-trained surface warfare officer, retiring as rear admiral in 2017.

Moderating today's conversation is Tara Copp, journalist at *The Washington Post*. She was previously a Pentagon correspondent for the *Military Times* and *Stars and Stripes*. She has reported from the Middle East, Europe, and Asia, and has appeared on CNN, BBC, Fox, and C-SPAN to discuss military issues. Her latest book "The Warbird" was published in 2017.

Before we dive in, just a few words about FDD.

For more than 20 years, FDD has operated as a fiercely independent, non-partisan research institute, exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. As a point of pride and principle, FDD does not accept foreign government funding.

For more on FDD's work, please visit their website, fdd.org, follow them on X or Instagram, and subscribe to their YouTube channel. They are everywhere.

Tara, the floor is yours.

COPP: Thank you. Thank you, everybody, for being here today. I think that this discussion just got a lot timelier with President Zelenskyy's visit coming this Friday. So, I do want to just start there with the news of the day.

President Trump has come back with a negotiated peace settlement between Israel and Gaza and has high hopes that he can accomplish the same between Russia and Ukraine.

But I think, to really have a full discussion about this, Admiral Voronchenko, I want to start with you. Let's get a lay of the land.

From your objective view as a former inspector general, how is the war going for Ukraine? Are they stronger at this moment in time, or they — were they stronger under the Biden administration?

VORONCHENKO: I'm sorry. I'm — will speak Ukrainian language.

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): Now, unfortunately, I cannot tell which administration was more effective for fighting the war in Ukraine.

But now, I would say, our war is in balance, and each administration got us pros and cons, so now it's just all about balance.

Now, everything is about our front line. It's on the east and on the south.

So, when we don't get any support, it doesn't affect us positively, of course. So now, our state or the situation in Ukraine is not positive at all.

Now, the U.S. administration has something to give us that can show Russia their place.

COPP: When you say that it's not positive, the situation right now for Ukraine, can you give some specific examples?

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): Russia has quickly adapted to all the changes, technological changes, that we used. And so now, they can upscale the effect against us.

For example, now they are using new ways and numbers of drones that they are applying against us, and they use up to 600 drones per day.

MONTGOMERY: If I can add one thing, what we've seen is — Corky and I in our visits, and I'm sure Andy sees it, too — is that the line — the distance of most of the reserve forces or the fighting forces from the center line of contact used to be 10 kilometers, kept there by drones, then it became 20. Now, it's looking at 35 kilometers. And when you do that, you give the Russian army an opportunity for more salient breakthroughs.

And so, I think that, as Ihor mentioned, the improvement in technology by Russians, particularly with their fiber optic-enabled drones is going to stretch Ukrainian defenses a little.

COPP: So, with that as kind of a scene and expectation setting for this Friday's discussion, this question is for the whole panel, so we'll just go down the row.

What do you think are the realistic chances for getting anywhere close to an agreement, not just this Friday, but as discussions start? And what makes this attempt different?

MONTGOMERY: So, obviously, there are variables in here, how much pressure the president is willing to bring on President Putin — our president, President Trump — is willing to bring on President Putin.

But I think, honestly, that I don't see Putin backing down before he tries another offensive next summer. So, if you were to ask me what's the time frame, it's 15 to 18 months until we get to this.

Now, President Trump gets a vote. If President Trump were to slap 100 percent tariffs on China, India, and Turkey for taking shadow fleet fossil fuels and knock down the amount of money coming into the Russian treasury on that. The Russian treasury spends its money — 40 percent of federal government spending in Russia is on the war effort. If you decrease the amount of money coming in, you decrease the amount of money for the war effort. That could have a significant impact.

And the other one, and I'm sure we'll talk about it, is the provision of different weapons systems. Even if purchased by the Europeans, some of these weapons systems can make a big difference, particularly on the offensive side.

COPP: Admiral, to you, for this meeting on Friday, do you sense that there's anything different? Do you have any more hope or do you think this is just the next round of discussion?

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): So, one general once said that "Hope dies last." And, of course, I still hope that the whole world will understand that the evil is Russia. And they will understand that this Friday.

And, of course, we need to know that Putin is a cannibal. He only understands force. He only needs us to show him force. And now, it's a perfect environment for him to use his inhuman ideas, to use his inhuman and uncivilized things that he made it up. So, that's what we should do to show the whole world that Putin is inhuman.

VORONCHENKO: I hope then decision might come through.

COPP: Colonel Bain, what are your thoughts on whether there's a realistic chance in this discussion? And just to add on, what do you think President Zelenskyy needs to do at this meeting to get things going in a more positive direction for Ukraine?

BAIN: Well, I think Putin is clearly the critical variable in any resolution of the war. And I think the key issues surrounding that are going to be the price of oil and how much revenue Russia can extract or be prevented from getting.

Also increasing, and actually enforcing, sanctions against Russia for the microchips and the other technologies they're getting and then giving Ukraine enough weapons to defend itself.

And this is — this meeting Friday is going to deal with that. And I think Zelenskyy needs to be deferential and also play into what the president thinks about Ukraine and how best to work with him on that.

I think it'll be a good weapons deal, but it won't solve the war. I think Putin's going to keep going until he sees pressure from the other areas as well.

COPP: General Corcoran, what are your thoughts?

CORCORAN: I agree with the other panelists. This is about Putin. It's about compelling Putin to come to the table. President Zelenskyy, I think on Friday he's going to say that he is, just as he has been, he's ready and willing to come to the table and talk. But until and unless Putin is compelled to do the same, nothing's going to change.

Dan Rice, the president of American University in Kyiv, characterized the fight a couple days ago as kind of two separate fights. There's a frozen conflict along the front line and then there's a ranged conflict. And Mark addressed that, the frozen conflict and, you know, there's not much movement there.

But the interesting thing is another report that just came out, Putin has lost 280,000 troops in the first eight months of the year. He clearly doesn't care about the loss of life, so that's not going to compel him. The ranged campaign, he's attacking civilian infrastructure, whereas the Ukrainians are attacking petroleum. So, he doesn't really care about the rules or laws of war.

So, what he does care about is — Mark mentioned — is his pocketbook. And so, if we really get serious about the shadow fleet, if we really get serious about the sanctions, if we really get serious about stopping supplies coming from China and Iran, I think that maybe Putin comes to the table, but that has to happen or nothing's going to change.

COPP: Admiral Voronchenko, does Ukraine have the manpower to keep fighting if you have to go through yet another summer and winter season?

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): First and foremost, Ukrainian nation is not the same as Russian nation. And whatever their president says, we are not brothers.

And our people can easily stand for their land, and we will do it till the last person.

Because we're fighting with a strong enemy and we don't have any other option just to live.

In strategic context, now we [are] shifting our center of gravity and now we're shifting it towards infrastructure and fuel complex of Russia.

And of course it brings us some results. And we, no matter what resources we have, we will still try and continue fight against Russia with indirect actions, too.

MONTGOMERY: On the manpower issue, one thing I'd mention is that they've reimagined, like how an infantry brigade looks. It is much less men and women on the actual line of contact. I mean, I think we were surprised at the low numbers, density of people per kilometer. You know, it's in the single digits or, you know, six to 10 soldiers per kilometer defending that area, and then back 10, 20, and 30 kilometers are other groups, that does lend itself to being able to still bring in manpower. If manpower knows they're headed directly to the line of contact, I think, you know, there's going to be a little more hesitancy.

Now, this is different than the Russians. The Russians clearly are putting large numbers of people right through the grinder and hence their really high casualty rates. I mean, I'm hearing numbers like the average Russian, the mean Russian service, is 30 days. That means within 30 days, half the people are off the front line, dead or wounded, within 30 days of entry into the military. That's not, you know, that's two weeks of training and then down to the front. These are brutal numbers.

Whereas with the Ukrainians with a much, a much different fighting style that recognizes and values human, you know, the mortality of their troops. It's going to be different. They still have a manpower issue. I'm not saying they don't, but I think it's a less — I think that they can avoid the trauma for at least 12 to 15 months, I think are left in this.

CORCORAN: The U.S. Army modernization initiatives that are being discussed at the AUSA [Association of the United States Army] conference right now are the things that Ukraine is actively doing on the battlefield. They're leveraging technology rather than putting humans in harm's way to defeat the Russian onslaught.

COPP: I was just about to ask all of you do you think that it's the use of drones that is allowing that very sparse number of people on the front lines?

CORCORAN: Absolutely, absolutely.

COPP: General Corcoran, this one we'll start with you, but I have a feeling that everyone's going to want to jump in. So, before Tomahawks, the hot weapon to send was F-16s. Can you tell us a little bit about, from your view, how Ukraine's air war has evolved? And with so many drones now in use, do you still really need an advanced fighter jet? Why do we need to send F-16s?

CORCORAN: Yeah, well, like I mentioned a moment ago, there's a couple different wars going on, right? There's the fight along the frozen conflict that is the front line. That's extended out up to about 20 kilometers either side of the front line. I would contend, and I think others who are air power smart would say that that has happened directly because no side garnered air superiority at the start of the conflict.

There is then the deep strike campaign that is going on, and it doesn't matter so much what equipment you use to do it as that you actually do it. And you can actually design and execute command and control, use intelligence, and target the appropriate objectives, to achieve what you're getting after. And I think Ukraine had done sparse attacks over the last couple years, but now you see them executing a concerted deep strike campaign against the petroleum infrastructure in Russia. And it's having an impact.

You see Russia attempting to execute more of a terror campaign with their long-range drones. I think what you're going to see from Ukraine, in the very near future with some additional weapons we give them, specifically the ERAM — extended range attack munition — that they'll be able to launch off of all their fighters. I think that's going to have an impact as they apply it to those same deep strike targets.

So, manned, or unmanned isn't really the issue. It's how do you get to affordable mass, I will say, to execute the air campaign that is going to support the overall joint campaign to achieve your strategic objectives as a nation. And I applaud what Ukraine has done to leverage the F-16 to integrate it so quickly and so effectively into what they're doing, not only defensively, but offensively.

COPP: But Tomahawks and F-16s aren't exactly affordable.

CORCORAN: I say the — you know, we'd have to do an analysis over time.

MONTGOMERY: Their F-16s were free, quite frankly, so —

CORCORAN: When you can take — look, if you've got a ground launch weapon, like an APKWS [Advanced Precision and Kill Weapons System], an old school rocket that is sitting by this chair, it can only defend something within range of the chair. But if you now put 48 of those on an F-16, it can maneuver around to wherever the Shaheds are and it can shoot the Shaheds down for much less than the cost of the Shahed.

Now you're on your right side of the cost curve, so there are arguments for both. And does the F-16 need to be manned? We could talk about that in a future discussion as well. But you know, it takes a village, it takes a team, it takes layers of different effectors to get this right.

COPP: I can see you just wanting to get on this.

MONTGOMERY: Yes. Look, I'll be a stronger advocate for air power than Major General Corcoran. I'll say that. I say the F-16 is critical. They're going to get 80 of them. Look, if I were them, I'd buy — I think the Koreans might sell them really nice F-16s for $5 million a copy. I'd buy them in a heartbeat.

Because an F-16, it can fly 100 missions. It can fly 200 missions. It might fly one. But, I mean, the cost of it begins to go down dramatically when you look at that.

And I think the F-16 is a big — they have a promise right now of about 80. They'll lose a few in combat. They've already lost a few. But this is to me, this is a significant event.

Elon Musk said the night before Israel removed the Iranian air defense systems, he called the F-35 a dinosaur. He was wrong about the F-35. I think people are underestimating the F-16.

The F-16 is going to, as Corky mentioned, be the primary defender against drones. As they begin to get — we're going to begin to flow to them advanced persistent kill weapon system rockets, where for $10,000 to $20,000 a round, maybe $30,000 a round, they can shoot down a Shahed that costs $70,000 to $200,000. They've already done a few with F-16s.

So, it has a big defensive counter air role, and then it'll have a big attack role.

I think when it gets the ERAM, that extended range ammunition, you're talking about a — this is a low cost for the United States — $250,000 weapon.

I have to say, every once in a while, you realize the U.S. defense industrial base isn't totally dorked up. This is a weapon that we commissioned 24 months ago, and it's been tested — built, tested, and delivered by two different companies, a 300-to-700-kilometer range attack munition that has GPS and other ways of getting to the target.

I mean, if you ask the U.S. Air Force to build this for themselves, they come back with a $4 million weapon. But for the Ukrainians, they did it for $250,000 to $300,000. It's fantastic. It's going to push the Russians off the front lines in a way that they haven't experienced before.

And we know one thing about the Russians. They don't fight well with extended logistics lines. They failed completely in February of 2022 when they got extended in March of 2022. I think they'll be really put under pressure with this.

So, I think the F-16, and to a lesser degree, the MiG-29s and Sukhois that the Ukrainians have, can have a much bigger effect over the next 12 to 15 months.

So, I think air power is back in this Eastern European conflict, and it's courtesy of the — primarily the F-16, but, also, these great weapon systems that the United States is providing, even if it is with European money.

COPP: Colonel Bain?

BAIN: I'm a little less platform-centric than Corky and Monty.

I tend to think the real opportunity with the Ukrainians — right now, you've got two armies with Soviet legacies and a war of attrition, and in that model, the bigger army is going to win. And the opportunity the Ukrainians have is to change the way they do war, to change to the Western way of war. That's what the Ukraine Freedom Fund — we did a whole analysis on this using some American generals and some Ukrainian generals who were trained in the West, and we looked at — other than changing the way the President's Office does business as a critical feature to improve the way Ukraine is fighting, is to work with the general staff and the senior leadership in the way they approach how they do planning.

The 2023 counteroffensive was unsuccessful. It was largely unsuccessful because Ukrainians admit that they have difficulty doing operations above the company level.

And we've been working with them now training core headquarters as to how to do joint operations, how to do a staff operations that can work in coordination with the flanks and react and anticipate what the enemy is going to do.

And I think it's a critical opportunity the Ukrainians have in training and education that takes some time but will change the way they fight effectively on the battlefield.

COPP: I'll stay with you for my next question, and I want to stay on drones.

Over the years and over the different major wars the U.S. has seen, we've seen evolutions in war fighting. And I think that a lot of defense experts have said this is basically the first major drone war.

Do you agree with that and how do you think this is changing how we prepare for future conflicts?

BAIN: I think it clearly is the first major drone war. But you see a lot of tech companies over there — and I won't disparage the tech companies, but they're run by technologists who are not necessarily experienced in warfare, and I think it's — they think there's a revolution in warfare going on. And I'd say it's evolutionary not revolutionary.

Air power, clearly, has much more significance impact in how war has developed. Gunpowder, the stirrup, all these changes are just evolutionary.

Look, a lot of the drones they're using, not as some air platform, but as smart mortar rounds or smart artillery rounds, which give greater capability and at a cheaper price. But I think it's changing the nature of war at the tactical level. It's changing other elements of ISR [Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance] and command and control.

But I don't think it's revolutionary in that context.

COPP: Admiral Voronchenko, do you want to weigh in on the importance of drones right now?

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): So, as I said, now, the enemy is adapting very fast and they're using new ways to fly their drones.

So, basically, to drain our air defense system, they're using decoy drones.

And then they use their real drones to attack our objects accurately.

And that's what we need to take into account while preparing to these drone attacks.

And maybe you've heard about our "Spider Web" operation that's when we used drones deep into Russia and achieved the great surprise effect.

And I believe that's our future way of fighting.

COPP: Mark, would you like to weigh in?

MONTGOMERY: Yes. I'd say, I think drones have — first, I got to give Azerbaijan a little credit. I think they fought a pretty good war with drones, but not a major war like you said.

When I think about how I'd pull this forward, we also spend at FDD, spend a lot of time in Taiwan and work with their military. And when I think about how it applies there, it's not complete.

The drones will have a big effect in the fight in Taiwan west across the Taiwan Strait towards China, you know how you sink all these Chinese ships and, potentially, in some kind of hellscape environment.

But when you think about the war east of Taiwan, where there's — Chinese are out there with air power and sea power, it's going to be more like Israel and Iran. Can you roll back the adversary's air power with more traditional expensive weapons?

So, I try not to overreact on this, over index so everything has to be drones. Our Navy and our Air Force, particularly, have to learn from the combat in Ukraine and Russia, but not over-learn. Make sure they still continue to develop those other things, those other kind of weapon systems that are necessary for high-end warfare.

So, it's kind of a — it's a mixed blessing in this. We're learning from it, but we need to not over-learn from it, and make sure we maintain both those capabilities.

Hey, if I could mention one other thing.

It's frustrating to me as a retired military officer, there's two countries in the world where the U.S. won't send active duty, like, generals and admirals. One is Ukraine and the other is Taiwan. One is the war we're in and one is the war we're preparing for.

And how we're supposed to learn — because, at some level, your senior leaders need to understand what's happening, need to do it. But we, in a bipartisan basis, the last five administrations — but in the context of this war in Ukraine, the last two administrations — do not allow our active duty leadership to go learn the lessons from Ukraine, and they don't allow us to engage with Taiwan.

This is clinically insane. You would never think that this is your policy about how you deal with partners or allies. But it's how the United States deals with things.

So, when you ask me, are we learning from this? I'm not 100 percent sure. We don't see — Corky and I do not see a lot of active-duty U.S. military person. I'm not going to say zero. But we don't see a lot of active-duty U.S. personnel in Ukraine, despite all this learning going on.

I will tell you, the Russians are learning from the battle in Ukraine naturally, and they are going to get smarter and wiser and better against NATO. And I think the Chinese are learning very aggressively from the Russians, in a way that we're not learning from the Ukrainians. So, I think there's an important lesson here for us on getting more engaged.

COPP: General Corcoran, to follow on that, and also, this was going to flow right next into my next question. We always ask about what lessons should be learned right now. If you had these generals in the room right now, what would you, based on your time on the ground, tell them they need to be watching for?

CORCORAN: Well on the drone piece, we call a lot of things drones, from tiny little first-person view, all the way up to tens of millions of dollars, what we call group five, and everything in between.

And I want to applaud my Marine colleague here for plugging joint operations. And this is what I would have our generals and admirals who are on active duty be diving into in Ukraine and making sure we apply for Taiwan or any other AOR [Area of Responsibility] is the lessons learned on the need to conduct joint operations at speed and scale. This is why Ukraine and Russia are in a frozen conflict because they can't do it, and it's why Israel was so successful because they can do it.

Look at what Israel did with some small drones inside Iran, paired with air power, cyber effects, space effects long-range fires, to dismantle completely any air defenses, and then allow them to take out the archer that was launching missiles, rather than trying to shoot every missile.

Ukraine and Russia are left with this frozen conflict, they don't know how to target at depth, and so now you're left trying to shoot down every Shahed that comes your way if you're Kyiv, for example, rather than dismantling the capability for Russia to launch those Shaheds.

So, I think our admirals and our generals need to be in there reinforcing in their minds just joint ops work. They're where they are in Ukraine and Russia right now because they didn't conduct joint operations, have not figured out how on the Ukrainian side to de-Sovietize themselves and execute a campaign using all the different tools and all the different domains to bust through Russia's IADS [Integrated Air Defense Systems] and conduct long-range strikes, and, basically, force Putin to come to the table.

COPP: But don't you think if we had some active duty general and fly officers in the room they would say, "But we do joint operations. That's what we train for. That's what all our doctrine says." But you're not — in practicality, you're saying we're not, maybe ready for that?

CORCORAN: I think if you went to AUSA right now, you'd see a kiddy-soccer focus on small drones for infantrymen. Other than a focus on, how do we take the drone tool and integrate it into the joint force to conduct a strategic-level campaign? Not, how do we fight the battle right in front of us at the frontline, but how do we overall utilize this technology to the best of our ability to achieve our strategic objectives?

MONTGOMERY: I would take it from joint and say coalition. In other words, they don't — Ukraine and Russia are fighting individually. I get that. But if you consider, like, how we are integrated with Taiwan right now, it would force us down to the lowest common denominator almost immediately, and we would look like Ukraine and Russia.

So, the lesson for this — I think we are a joint force. I get it. AUSA is proving once in a while, we could dive down. But I mean, Cork and I know each other because we fought together in a joint force. But we're not like that with Taiwan, so that if we were fighting China with Taiwan, we would revert to the form that we see in Ukraine or with Russia.

So, the lesson for us is, holy crap, we've got to get all of our forces up to this joint level, and that means the coalition level with the Taiwans. I think we're there the Japanese.

But I say this: My lesson learned when I watch it is exactly that what Corky was saying, but probably not using the word "joint"; using the word "coalition" and we're not there at all, and it looks ugly.

COPP: I'd argue we're also there with Korea, but with Taiwan, there's limitations. So how do you do that?

MONTGOMERY: Well, the limitations are policy limitations. These are choices. I mean, I don't — you know, a bunch of guys here have heard me say this. You know, I've got a son in the Navy, and you know, we're apparently willing to risk him to defend Taiwan. We say we're going to go in there. In every wargame, 7,000 or 30,000 people get killed, but ahead of time, we're not going to prepare with them. I mean, this is — our current policy is very, very limited excises. Only exercises we have is because Congress ordered it, and OSD [Office of the Secretary of Defense] has aggressively, under two administrations, chosen not to implement an exercise schedule. We're not — we're de-conflicted with Taiwan, and I know this isn't a Taiwan discussion, but I'll just say, the big lesson from us is, is that you'd better be able to fight at an integrated warfighting level with all these tools we have, or you're going to get killed. And you can see the death rates in Ukraine and Taiwan, and the U.S. people are not ready for those kind of death rates, so we'd better be damn good. And to be damn good, you've got to practice and integrate ahead of time, and we don't do that, and it's a great deal of risk to future forces.

COPP: So, I'm going to jump back to Ukraine. Admiral Voronchenko, let's talk about the PDAs [Presidential Drawdown Authority]. Of the PDAs that the U.S. has provided, what weapon provided by the U.S., in your view, has made the biggest difference? And it seems like there's going to be a weapons announcement maybe tomorrow. What is it Ukraine needs the most right now?

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): What we've received in the first days of war were Javelins. They had the great effect for us. They helped us for repelling attack on east and south.

Then we received HIMARS, and they were very important for us. They played the key role.

But we didn't have enough weapons to hit the logistics and to hit into depth to cut the MSRs [Military Supply Routes], so that's what we needed now.

That's why HIMARS and ATACMS [Army Tactical Missile System] were very important and played a huge role for supporting Ukraine.

And of course, when I was commanding a fleet — in the fleet, we used anti-ship missiles and it was very important back then.

So, this anti-ship missile part was very important for repelling attacks from the sea.

COPP: So, what would be the top of your list right now for weapons for Ukraine?

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): HIMARS, I think.

COPP: More HIMARS, not Patriots?

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): Now, you mean?

COPP: Yes.

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): I believe that HIMARS were very — were the most successful key point or turning point when our enemy realized that we can strike them into depth, and only it took them some time to find the E.W. [Electronic Warfare] that they would need against us.

MONTGOMERY: I think you're hearing Major General Voronchenko, the Armored Division commander, there speaking a little bit.

(LAUGHTER)

COPP: Well, same question to you. What do you think should be at the top of Ukraine's PDA list for something?

MONTGOMERY: You know, look, on PDA, which is truly delivered immediately from supplies, I'd take ATACMS because it gives some of the range. I'm going to assume they've already purchased the ERAM that Corky and I mentioned. If we gave them 500 or 1,000 ATACMS — we bought about 6,000. The Army's out of the ATACMS business.

They've moved on to something called Precision Strike Missile. This would be a great deal: They get the PDA. The Army gets that. They get money to go buy Precision Strike Missiles. So, if we PDA-ed ATACMS, with unlimited usage, they'd give them 4-, 500 kilometer-range weapons that, you know, they could use, or 3- to 500 kilometer-range weapons that they could use to really, again, push back the front. They'd have to be without restrictions.

And the other thing I'd give them is this thing called — which we mentioned earlier called APKWS — Advanced Persistent Kill Weapon System. It's a rocket that's fired from the F-16. F-16 can carry 14 to 42 of them. They can make — this can knock down these Shahed drones, and this would really make it easier on the Patriot, not having the Shaheds around. You know, you don't need to — not that they do it very often, but a Patriot rounds about $4 million now. This APKWS is 20 to $40,000.

Let's get them these and really allow them to knock down the thickness of these attacks that are coming each night. When they say 600 missiles and drones come, it's about 500 or 550 missiles and drones in that. And so really being able to knock those down would be critical. And the F-16 is made for this.

But they need the exact right software and those weapons systems. That's the PDA I prioritize right now, and again, those exist in our system. So, they could have them in weeks or months, not months or years.

CORCORAN: I think we might be able to do it for free, but the weapon I'd give them is the ability to modify the F-16 software on their own. Rather than have to come back to us every time they want to integrate a new weapon or a new electronic warfare capability, et cetera, if we said, "Go forth." They've proven to be very digitally literate as a society, probably more than us in a lot of ways, and they've got a lot of weapons that they could integrate on the F-16, but they're beholden to us for the software for these. So, if they could do that...

(CROSS-TALK)

MONTGOMERY: And we allow the Israelis to do this?

CORCORAN: Yeah. The Israelis have done it for years. And so, I think that would be a game-changer.

And then — I keep going back to this, but they need some advice on applying the tools, right? They really need to take out the Shahed factory, the big one in Tatarstan, right? That would be a game-changer.

COPP: How much delay does it inject when Ukraine does have to come back and get a software update on the F-16s? How much tactical delay does it create?

CORCORAN: It depends. Best case, probably six months. Best case.

COPP: Wow. Would you like to weigh in?

BAIN: Well, again, on the PDA, I would say the most important weapon they've gotten so far is the Javelin, not because it's a better weapon than the others but because it was the first time the US gave sophisticated weaponry, and it changed the morale and the Ukrainian people understood the US would support it with sophisticated weapons.

After the Javelin and they didn't win the war, it didn't change the war, they went, "Oh, if only we had the HIMARS," then it was, "If only we had the ATACMS," and "If it's — only we had the F-16." Now it's, "If only we had the Tomahawk." And so, the weapon — every time there's going to be a new weapons system until the war is won.

I think what they really need right now is something with a long-range strike capability. I, as a Marine, we didn't play with missiles too much, so I'm not going to say which one that is, but something that could hit infrastructure, something that — logistical...

(CROSS-TALK)

... and...

(LAUGHTER)

... but the we were at the front a couple of weeks ago. General McKiernan's on our advisory board too, and he and I were at the front with Ihor. And they were talking about the impact the gasoline shortage is having both in the retail market in Russia but also at the frontline, that their armored and motorized operations had decreased significantly.

So having that long-range strike capability impacts both operations and the greater impact — economic impact on the Russians. So, I think that's the key capability you want to give them.

COPP: Admiral, based on what you've seen on the front lines when you guys were all there together, did you see the same shortage with the fuel? And what — now that you've heard everybody else's answers, do you want to change your response on what you think Ukraine wants?

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): As a military, I'll say one thing. We are out of everything.

And every commander wants to ask for more and more.

But Andy and I think that the most important task is to train those people in the front lines, and then they will help us to achieve the great success.

This is why we are working on the program where we can shift the philosophy of planning, of thinking to the Western one that is more modern.

As you might know, now, on the fourth year of war, we have a new structure, and we have 16 corps.

So now training level and unity and cohesion is the most important thing in each corps, and that's what we're doing now.

COPP: OK. New topic for you. So, some of Congress's concerns about providing Ukraine more funding, more weapons, it's been their ongoing concern about corruption within Ukraine and accountability for the weapons that have been provided.

So as — asking you to — as a former inspector general, can you talk about the impact corruption has had on the war?

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): There is corruption in each country, we agree.

But the level of this corruption is very different in each country.

And there are many factors for this.

It's about civic consciousness or it's about institutions, it's about how we were taught.

But it's also about mechanisms that can affect the level of corruption.

When I was in service, I had a lot of stuff to do to solve such issues.

And back then, the financial budget was — now it's higher than it was before, and that's why now we still have some issues.

And I cooperated. I worked with general inspection [Inspector] of United States.

And I am very grateful to Robert Storch…

for giving help and explanations how to build this structure of fighting corruption.

We do have anti-corruption institutions, and they are now working. So, we will work more on that.

Recently because the society changed and the leadership changed, it all became very transparent. So now it's more difficult to do all this corruption.

And what's the most important in digital world, it's very transparent.

MONTGOMERY: Can I add one thing that I think what Andy mentioned Ukraine Freedom Fund looks primarily like doing the core level commander training, which has been fantastic. But another aspect they do is something that's really important which is how do you get the Ukrainian military ready for adhering accession to a European security framework such as NATO, but maybe something else?

And the answer is they're really hurting in a lot of areas. One is procurement, which is where you get some corruption, but education, how they recruit people, how they train them, you know, how they do military justice. And the problem is when you want to enter NATO — I brought a bunch of countries through NATO when I was at U.S. European Command. There's long check sheets. Now the hardest one is usually conduct an L shaped ambush and defeat an enemy in the field. I think Ukraine's got that one checked. But there's other ones that are really administratively burdensome.

And I just mentioned four or five of those areas that could take five to six years for former Soviet Socialist Republics to normally get all that done. They're not going to have five to six years. So, we've got to figure out how to, moving along now, start the reform processes in these other organizations. And that's it's hard, it's hard to look at President Zelenskyy or the Minister of Defense and say, "I know you're having a, you know, butt kicking problem here with the Russians but at the same time you've got to change these things."

I think the procurement one, we have a little skin in the game because there's our money there, there's European money, but these other ones have to get fixed as well. And Ihor was fixing one of the judicial one when he was inspector general. That's how we came to know each other again. But we've got to do this, and it will — we've got to make it so they join like Sweden and Finland in six months or a year, not like, you know, Poland and Estonia and Latvia, which were five, six, seven-year processes.

COPP: So, with that, do we have any questions in the audience? Yes, sir.

GAUL: Good morning, or good afternoon. China continues to send components to Russia, especially for fiber optics, drones. They continue to buy Russian oil. It seems to me like it's in China's best interest for this war to continue. Is that your assessment as well?

MONTGOMERY: I'll take that first. Yes, 100 percent. They [China] are trying to entangle the United States and Europe and keep us distracted. And they're trying to bleed Russia, their, you know, their weaker partner, and keep them their weaker partner. Look, Ukraine is fighting four countries, you know, Russia, China, North Korea and Iran. We get confused by North Korea and Iran and think that they're a bigger play than China. They're not.

North Korean troops never entered Ukraine. They fought in Kursk. Their artillery matters. Five million rounds going to kind of hurt. The Shaheds hurt. But Russia is — what China is doing is backstopping the war. They've increased their trade and their foreign direct investment — their trade, imports and exports — 40 percent with Russia over three years. They are providing the microelectronics you mentioned for cruise and ballistic missiles that are, you know, shattering down, you know, electrical power infrastructures in Ukraine.

China is the number two player in this war against Ukraine. Ukraine needs to recognize it. I think they don't like to acknowledge this publicly, but we do, too. China is bleeding out Ukraine along with Russia, and they need to be held accountable for this. And we need to be, you know, if it's tariffs or export controls or whatever the president decides, he needs to apply them to China and say this is about your support for the war against Ukraine and not lift it for any other reason than they stop their support for the war for Ukraine.

Those are the kind of tariffs I could get behind. And there's a blindness to this, I think, in our leadership and sometimes even in the Ukrainian leadership, where they don't want to say out loud the obvious thing that China is their enemy and Taiwan's their friend.

COPP: Yes, sir.

SCHWUNG: Thank you very much. I've got a question for whoever wants to take it, it's a little thought experiment. So, picture yourself as Donald Trump. You just came back from the Middle East. You're feeling very happy about the peace you made. Now you want to do the same with Ukraine. Can you talk a little bit about what is different in terms of what cards the president now holds and the people he has to engage with?

MONTGOMERY: I'll take a whack. Look, this is a hard question. Look, first of all, in Gaza, in the Middle East, President Trump was taking advantage of the fact that his partner was inflicting significant military damage on the adversary. That is not the condition we have right now. I mean, Ukraine — Putin is not in that weak a position. He is not in the same position Hamas was in, or even Qatar might have felt in. You know, he's in a different position. So, that's harder.

But he should take from it that "I'm the president of the most powerful country in the world, and if I decide I want to put pain on you, I can put pain on you." He could put a lot more pain on Russia, and he could do a lot more to support Ukraine. If he supported Ukraine like he supports Israel, and he put pain on Russia like he put pain on the Hamas fighters, you know, through the support to Israel, we'd be at a much different, you know, he could achieve some success there, but he is not, you know — that's harder. He has to take the risk himself.

Netanyahu, strengths and weaknesses, took the risk for him in the Gaza campaign. He'd have to do it himself here. So, I think it's harder. But if he wants to be the Nobel Prize winner, we are in the period now for the award of the 2026 Nobel Prize through this January, he can do something about it. And I would say this would be one more feather in his cap if he could figure out how to get it done.

COPP: Does anyone else on the panel want to jump in?

BAIN: I'll just throw out there.

I mean, I know Ukraine. I don't know the Middle East that well. But it strikes me he must have a lot of goodwill amongst all the oil producing nations of the Middle East, except Iran. And to drive down the price of oil to hurt oil revenues in Russia, I think would be critically important, in terms of neutering Russian capabilities.

COPP: So, I'll take moderator's prerogative and jump back in for a second.

So, let's say that Friday goes really well, and it seems like there may be prospects for peace, even if it's 15 months away. Does that future agreement include a continuation of the current leadership, or does there need to be an election?

Is there a future without President Zelenskyy? Is that a necessary element?

BAIN: I would — President Zelenskyy — it's interesting. In the U.S., everyone tells us he's very popular. In Ukraine, I can't find anyone that wants to vote for him if he's up for election. And I think there's a number of reasons behind that.

I think it could be considered that, once the peace comes and martial law is ended, and then an election comes and he's forced out of power, there may be malfeasance that's investigated, which may not prove kind to some of the people currently in power.

But I would think, ultimately, a post-war settlement is going to be without Zelenskyy soon thereafter.

MONTGOMERY: But I don't think he'd be dictated by Putin. If Putin walks in and say, "One of my conditions is Zelenskyy is not president," we have to say, "Then, well, I guess, we're not having a peace discussion."

Now, if the people of Ukraine decide in a post-martial law election to remove Zelenskyy. We love a democracy. I mean, this is what democracy is about. Elections have consequences.

But it can't be dictated by Putin. And he is trying to dictate that, and that's unacceptable. He can't dictate when elections happen or who wins them.

Well, he can in his own country. He does it all the time. But he can't do that in Ukraine.

In Ukraine, what has to happen is, you have to have a ceasefire, you have to have a reasonable period of checking, then you have a relaxation of martial law, then you have elections. They need them.

Their Rada has been in power since — their Congress — since 2019. That's a long time for any Congress to go without elections.

So, they need elections. But they need elections on Ukrainian constitutional basis, not Vladimir Putin's whim. And I hope the president — our president — recognizes that in these negotiations.

COPP: Admiral, I'm sure you have a lot to say on this.

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): You might know that our people love to choose and love to vote when it's transparent. Our elections are very transparent all the time. And I'm sure that, after war, all these people who faced war will make their choice right.

COPP: Does having your Congress in power since 2019, does that make the corruption worse, do you think?

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): Very difficult question.

COPP: I'm sorry?

(MULTIPLE SPEAKERS)

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): It's very difficult question.

COPP: Got it.

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): I'm sure we will talk about that when war ends. Because now in martial law, we don't want to do something that will affect our people in negative way.

MONTGOMERY: Yes.

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): As you know, corruption has three levels. Are you talking about the higher level of corruption?

COPP: Any level?

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): You will receive your answer.

MONTGOMERY: But Corky and I spoke with the Rada — with their Armed Services Committee, and it was interesting. There's three major — you can see three major factions in there — two parties and, really, one of them is broken into two factions.

And they would look like our — as one person was asking us a question, the other two groups were attacking him or her for asking the question—

CORCORAN: Actually, we're all in the same room, so…

(MULTIPLE SPEAKERS)

MONTGOMERY: Yes. It's kind of like a briefing or hearing thing. And it was clearly —they're a vibrant democracy with strong disagreements still.

The Rada needs an election because people need to have a choice more than every seven years on their elected representatives.

But not because it isn't a democracy working hard. And they were putting up bills and arguing about the facts that underlie them.

From a lot of us in here, a lot of — recognized a lot of cyber people in here, we pitched them on a cyber force. They passed legislation calling for a cyber force. I'll just say brilliant call by the Ukrainians. Only we could follow suit.

My point on this is, they get things done, and they have vibrant, aggressive discussions that are no worse or better than ours. So that part I'm OK with.

But your question of having the same politicians in place for seven years might mean that oversight — if it has a blind spot, keeps a blind spot. So, I think it's worthwhile to have these elections to get the transparency the Ukrainians love.

COPP: Last question is for you, Admiral Voronchenko, and thank you all for joining us.

What have I not asked you? What did you come here wanting to say today that maybe you haven't had an opportunity to say?

VORONCHENKO (THROUGH TRANSLATOR): I have mentioned everything. And I really hope that — I know that on Friday the right decision will be made in strategic sector to finish — to end this war.

MONTGOMERY: How about no more Shaheds at your house? Would that be all right?

COPP: Mark, any closing thoughts?

MONTGOMERY: All right. Look — first, thanks for hosting us here.

Look, I think the United States needs to be — we need to recognize now, the president — not because he needs a Nobel Peace Prize, but because he says he's the president who pushes hard for peace.

Sometimes pushing hard for peace means understanding who is the victim, and who's the aggressor.

Putin is the aggressor. Russia is the aggressor. Russia will not stop unless someone bigger and tougher than them punches them in the nose. That country is for better or worse, that country is the United States.

Whether we pay for everything or the Europeans pay for things, they've provided funds, we need to provide the Ukrainians with the weapons they need, the support they need to win, and we need to hobble the Russian efforts to conduct aggressive actions.

The President has the tools to do all of that. He spent the last eight months trying to figure out how to do this consensually. That time is over. He needs to absolutely apply every element of U.S. power, short of U.S. forces, to push Vladimir Putin into the right position.

He can do it. He's the only person in the world that can do this. And he should take that power and get us closer to peace, whether it's this Friday or 15 to 18 months from now. It's on the President of the United States.

COPP: Thank you all very much for your time today.

CORCORAN: Thank you.

END