

# FDD Media Call: Marking four years of Russia's invasion of Ukraine

February 19, 2026

Featuring *RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery, John Hardie, Ivana Stradner, and Peter Doran*

Moderated by *Joe Dougherty*

**DOUGHERTY:** Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us today. My name is Joe Dougherty, Senior Director of Communications here at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a non-partisan research institute focused on national security and foreign policy.

We're grateful that you've joined us today as we approach the four-year mark of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We've got a packed discussion today, so we're going to get to it right away because we know that your time is of essence and there's a lot to unpack.

We've got some outstanding experts on the call for you. First of all, we'll start with FDD Senior Fellow, Rear Admiral (Retired) Mark Montgomery, who is checking in with us from Kyiv. Mark served as US European Command Deputy Director for Plans, Policy and Strategy, helping to build US-Ukrainian military-to-military relations.

A former policy director for the Senate Armed Services Committee, Mark has traveled to Ukraine to participate in operational planning courses and provide pro bono training on specific military planning and organizational issues, and he'll address some of those in his opening remarks today.

John Hardie is Deputy Director of FDD's Russia Program, focusing on Russian foreign and security policy, US policy toward Russia, and the post-Soviet space, as well as transatlantic relations.

Ivana Stradner is an FDD Research Fellow focusing on Russia's security strategies and military doctrines, and psychological and technical aspects of Russian information security. Ivana also analyzes Russian influence in international organizations.

And we have Peter Doran. He is an FDD Adjunct Senior Fellow focused on Russia, Ukraine, Russian disinformation, energy security, and transatlantic relations. So four outstanding experts on a crucial issue today.

Some quick housekeeping issues: Today's conversation is on the record unless otherwise requested, but it is on the record. We'll share video of today's call as soon as it's ready shortly after the call concludes. I suspect within 20 to 30 minutes after that we'll get that to you. We'll share the transcript of the call within 24 hours, hopefully sooner.

We will have Q&A after the opening remarks from each of our experts. To ask a question, you may type it into the chat feature or you can press the raise hand feature to raise your hand and we will call on you to ask your question directly.

A lot to get through today. Mark, over to you. Thanks for getting us started.

**MONTGOMERY:** Thanks Joe, and thanks for everyone for being on the call. So as Joe mentioned, I'm here about a week into my training visit here in Kyiv and in some of the outlying areas.

Look, first thing is I look at ending the fourth year of war, heading in the fifth year, nothing on the ground that I see when I'm either with corps commander staffs or with the F-16s or with the units or with the ministry of defense -- nothing on the ground here tells me that Ukraine's going to lose. Their military resilience is still strong.

Things can get uglier for them. If the US were to cut off European purchases of American weapons or the Europeans were to not buy American weapons or if the US were to cut off intelligence support, there's certain ways it could go much worse for the military and for their civilian population.

But the military resilience is strong. I don't think a summer offensive by Russia will demonstrably change the battle space. We're still talking about tenths of a percent of territory being lost each year, vice percentages as they experienced in 2014. So again, I don't think they're going to lose that.

The second aspect is the societal resilience is still strong. And this is something I look at a lot in both Ukraine and Taiwan and Israel when I visit these countries, and Ukraine's societal resilience is strong.



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I mean, these are tough hits. The Russians are targeting not just electrical power grids, but the water heater production facilities. Who knew this country ran on a series of seven large boilers? I'm exaggerating slightly but, I mean, they're targeting things to make, as Boris Johnson said in his op-ed yesterday, to freeze old people and young children to death. I mean, that can be no other reason you do this.

But I still see the resilience in those people strong. I don't see a lot of newborn children on the street or anything like that. I mean, there's issues their society is going to have as a result of this war, but I don't see societal resilience breaking.

So that's the first. So this is going to go on. It's going to go on until the president puts enough leverage on Vladimir Putin to make the concessions that are necessary for a legitimate peace. Because Ukraine is not collapsing. Others can talk to whether Russia's going to collapse, but I'm not seeing that either. Now, I only see them through battlefield video, so it's hard to judge their resilience, but they're certainly dying in pretty large numbers.

Another thing I want to talk about a little bit is we can do better. Even with the United States cutting its security 99% and the Europeans stepping in, there are basic things the US and NATO can do better, and I'll take one example, and this is one of these weird things. When you shovel a ton of weapons in a country, you're going to have problems a few years later, and it's called life cycle maintenance. They don't know how to maintain these things.

Now, if it was a 155 round, no life cycle maintenance required, fire it out a barrel, it's gone, right? But when it's a Bradley Fighting Vehicle, which have done very well here, or there's very few M1A1 tanks left, but a tank, or a GMLRS, a HIMARS launcher for the guided missile launcher rockets and ATACMS, or most importantly the F-16, and I'll talk about the F-16, they've got problems with pilot accession, they've got challenges.

It's hard, as the planes are flowing in, they should have two pilots for every plane. They can't achieve that. It initially was US throughput, but that's fine now. The real problem is they've run out of English-speaking available MiG and Sukhoi pilots and they've now, turning to nugget pilots, you know fresh pilots, which have dropout rates. There are challenges there.

The second challenge, the one NATO could really help with, is the maintenance on the planes. These planes need something called phase maintenance which is a depot-level maintenance which can only be done in Belgium, maybe Greece, Romania, a few places in Europe. And NATO has not given them enough maintenance positions for, these are 90-day maintenance slots, and they don't have enough slots for their aircraft so their aircraft are starting to back up, no longer able to fly, sitting at a European airfield waiting for maintenance. That's not healthy at all.

And then there's supply parts issues. I'm not going to get into the names of them here, but they tell me a supply part, one I'm very aware of from my time in the 35 years in the Navy and I'm like, "Yeah, I know what that is." I'd see hundreds of them on an aircraft carrier and they're pretty common across off, jet aircraft. And they're short them, and this is something they can't fly without pretty soon, so what's NATO doing to control the supply chain to these planes?

And then finally, weapons. That Advanced Precision Kill Weapon System, I've been arguing for it for two years, it's kicking butt right here. And, I mean, a pilot went out two nights ago and shot down one pilot, one plane, hour and a half, a less than two-hour mission, shot down 11 Shaheeds, 10 with eight Advanced Precision Kill Weapons, rockets, and one with guns. That's phenomenal. I mean, that's the kind of stuff that validates this weapon system and means we should be getting them more. They're struggling with that.

And then finally, we've got to get them right on the F-16s, on how to use the Extended Range Attack Munition and punch through Russian airspace to really hit Russia in Russia proper with their new extended range weapons when they get them. And they're very close. I mean, they're at the point where they're training for them right now.

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My point on all this is -- there's opportunity there, but you see, there's opportunity left on the table by not tackling it properly. I just don't see the right focus on categorizing, prioritizing, and addressing these challenges by NATO and the US. That's who needs to do this. The Ukrainians are the customer in this. They're not going to be the driver. Or they got to be the customer, we got to get this right.

So my take, they're not losing. There's things we can do, because what I told you on F-16s is applicable in lots of other areas. I just happen to know that one from the last few days. We can really make things better for them, so look, I'm sad that they're headed into a fifth year of war, but I don't believe they're going to lose. I don't think they're traumatized and I think they're stubborn and strong.

Listen, I've said a lot there. Should I tee up John next, Joe?

**DOUGHERTY:** Yeah, let's transition over to John to give us a discussion on the situation of the battlefield right now. And Mark, we will get back into some of those things that you brought up, for sure. John, over to you.

**HARDIE:** Thanks, Joe. Thanks, Mark. And thanks for everyone for being here. I think Mark covered it pretty well, but just to put a finer point in some of the things you mentioned.

So Russia retains the strategic initiative, but they're really unable to do a whole lot with it. They're making these minor incremental gains. We'll probably see another surge of effort when the fighting season resumes in the spring and into the summer and fall, assuming the war lasts that long.

But I don't expect them to be able to achieve any sort of operational breakthrough that would enable rapid gains or to destroy large portions of Ukrainian forces, so they'll kind of probably continue using these infiltration tactics with small groups of men kind of creeping through [inaudible] Ukrainian lines.

That's important because of degraded force quality in the Russian side that it's just not going to recover while large-scale hostilities continue. And on the Ukrainian side, despite the well-known challenges with manpower, they continue to do a really good job of using drones of various types, mines and artillery to deny Russia the ability to maneuver, and to inflict really disproportionate casualties.

So Putin, he's been betting that, one, he can eventually grind down Ukrainians' will and capacity to resist, and two, he can use diplomacy with Trump to kind of undercut US support for Ukraine and strike a deal over Kyiv's head that imposes Russian terms on Ukraine.

So, so far, neither of those bets has paid off, but he's basically doubling down this year. We see that he's kind of clinging to these maximalist demands despite the kind of yawning chasm between his ends and means to achieve them.

But on the other side, Ukraine I think right now the struggle is that even though Russia can't impose its maximalist terms by force, neither can Ukraine kind of force Russia to come to the table and kind of accept a fair compromise deal.

So I think there's still a good bit of room for Ukraine's Western partners, especially the United States, to increase economic pressure on Russia that might improve Putin's willingness to compromise. I think ultimately it's going to come down to how long Russia can sustain the war on the economic and, more importantly, military dimension.

I think on the military side, as long as he can get enough fighters to throw into the meat grinder, the war is sustainable the way they're currently fighting. One, I think notable development over the past couple months is, at least according to Ukrainian authorities, they're starting to inflict more casualties than, these are KIA and seriously wounded, than the Russians are taking in through recruitment.

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So one thing I'll be watching for over the next couple months or so is to validate that claim and see if it continues. I think if that continues, that offers a pathway to eventually exhausting Russia's military offensive potential and then kind of forcing Putin into a tough decision on whether to kind of end the war in a compromised way or conduct another round of forced mobilization which is politically risky and something he's tried to avoid.

**DOUGHERTY:** Great.

**HARDIE:** Over.

**DOUGHERTY:** Thanks, John, and we'll come back to some of those details perhaps during the Q&A portion of the call a little bit later.

Mark, I'd like for you and Peter, to bring you both in to discuss what the United States and what Europe are doing well to support Ukraine and what they can be doing better to support the Ukraine in battling Russia.

**DORAN:** Mark, you want to take the lead on that or?

**MONTGOMERY:** No, you go first, Peter.

**DORAN:** Okay, good. Thanks so much, Joe. Look, I think we saw at the Munich Security Conference both Secretary Rubio and President Zelenskyy identify what the problem here is -- it's Russia.

We have had endless rounds of negotiations. If it feels like the film Groundhog Day that we're seeing the same thing over and over again, well, that's not an accident. Russia is playing a game with the president. President Trump's suspicion that Vladimir Putin was tap, tap, tapping him along is absolutely correct, but most importantly of all, he knows it.

So compare and contrast the upcoming anniversary, a grim anniversary, of the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine with what just happened today. President Trump convened his Board of Peace. He announced once more that he has solved eight wars, yet one war still eludes him, and that is this invasion.

Here's the problem: There is a mistake that the United States has been making on the negotiation side. This is not a war about NATO enlargement, it's not a war for a few small provinces in Eastern Ukraine. This is a war of national extermination which Russia has launched upon Ukraine. And as you continue your research and reporting, I would remind everyone to recall this upcoming anniversary is also the anniversary of the Bucha massacre.

Mark talked a bit about societal resilience among the Ukrainians. They understand exactly what will happen to them if Russia succeeds and they fail. Russia will do to the rest of Ukraine what it did to Bucha, that is killing hundreds of people, executing them in the streets and unleashing sexual violence as a weapon of war. This is what the Russian military does to towns it conquers. That's why Ukrainians are so resolved, and also, that's why the impetus on the United States side is even greater.

We have to change our approach in our negotiation strategy. We cannot continue to assume that Vladimir Putin will accept a few small territories in Eastern Ukraine. Until he gets what he wants, and that is the destruction of this country, this war will continue unless we force him to stop.

Mark talked a bit about the military side, so did my colleague John Hardie, but I would highlight again Secretary Rubio's visit to Budapest just this week.

During that visit, one question on the table, and it was not discussed publicly, was the waiver that President Trump has granted to the Hungarian government.

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Right now, Hungary is in violation of our own sanctions because it is purchasing oil and gas from Russia. President Trump has offered Hungary a short-term waiver that will expire soon in the next few months. And by all accounts, that waiver has not been extended. This is where the pressure point is most intense. And again, for your research and reporting, I would point to Russia's inflation and their budget problems. Russia is technically running out of money to continue to fund this war. The tighter we squeeze, the sooner we can bring about a just and lasting piece. That's where the focus should be, not over haggling and bargaining about territory in the east of Ukraine. If the administration takes that approach, I think we are closer to a ceasefire at least. If they don't, we will continue to see endless rounds of fruitless disappointing negotiations and killing on the battlefield.

**MONTGOMERY:** Joe ... Thank you, Peter. Joe, I'll jump in and answer the part about what the Europeans could be doing. My number one thought is they need to be purchasing PURL [Prioritized Ukraine Requirements List]. I know the Europeans have, and the prime minister of Canada, have talked about how Europe needs to build their own defense industrial base, tackle these things. That's fantasy land. That's a decade or two decades from now. They are several trillion dollars in arrears on building a defense industrial base, on building targeting, on building all the capabilities associated with running their own military. So they need to set that aside. I mean, they can invest in that and the United States should be encouraging them to invest in the defense industrial base, but they need to very specifically be filling the gap.

The US dropped its security assistance to Ukraine to 99%, effectively zero, one small package I think of \$5[00] or \$600 million, or even smaller than that. We need to make sure the PURL program is running functionally with Europe purchasing, I'm estimating about \$2 billion, maybe \$2.5 billion a month from that, not a billion a month. And what that is those are things that essentially cannot be made in Ukraine and Ukraine's defense industrial base gets bigger every quarter and they can do more and more for themselves. They're even starting 155, they're doing energetics, they're doing small weapons in addition to the unmanned air, ground surface, and subsurface that we all know about.

So they're expanding, but there's certain things they can't do and Europe can no longer give them or build themselves. That is the majority expense-wise, the weapon systems, and that's PURL, which is a acronym for the program for Europe, buying from the US defense industrial base. My point on that is I think they're underbidding right now on that, and I'm afraid that means things like Patriots and NASAMS, those are air defense weapons, some of the strike weapons or artillery are going to be in shorter supply if Europe isn't purchasing them.

And then of course the United States has to maintain its intelligence support through there, there is no European substitute for that. So in my mind, those are the kind of two battlefield things that have to happen to complement the political issues Peter mentioned.

I will say this, in Ukraine, Rubio's speech did not land to tumultuous applause. I think they read it as opposed to reading reports about it, and it was tough. And I got to tell you, his tour package afterwards, avoiding the Ukraine support meeting and then visiting Slovakia and Hungary, two non-Ukrainian-supporting European countries, really left a mark. So I'm hoping that what Peter averred to, which is that potentially Rubio delivers a stronger message privately, if that happened, that would be good. The public messaging was a little tough.

And I'll just say, I'm pretty sure Viktor Orban used his Rubio visit as a campaign event. We got pretty mad, if you can remember back, the Trump administration didn't appreciate it when that happened with Ukraine here, and yet, what's hypocrisy among friends, they appear to have no problem doing it to support Viktor Orban, who is generally just not a good dude. So from my point of view, those kind of things, the Ukrainians are a sophisticated class of national security readers, they have to be after four years of unconstrained warfare against them. And they possibly did not read the Rubio speeches that far from... It's better than Vance, but that far from the Vance speech.

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**DOUGHERTY:** Thanks, Mark. And I think this makes for a good transition to Ivana to talk about Russia's new generation warfare campaign versus Eastern Europe. And Ivana, of course, you're an expert on Russian disinformation campaigns, so feel free to address those issues as well.

**STRADNER:** As my colleagues, Admiral Montgomery and John Hardy brought lots of optimism about the war when it comes to Ukraine, as a true Eastern European, my role is to bring a little bit of pessimism because whether we like it or not, we are already at war with Russia, at least that's how the Kremlin understands. Why? Because there is a thing within Russia's military called a new generation of warfare, and according to that, we are already at a stage zero to one at war with Russia.

So we've heard so many times about hybrid war, and even though we are marking this year, the fourth year of a full-scale invasion, let's not forget that this war has been dragging more than 10 years. How? Even prior to that, by Russia's use of little green men in Ukraine. But more importantly, Russia has been waging horrible sabotage activities across the west. We oftentimes talk about influence operations only around the election times, but that's actually happening 24/7, 365 days. And not only that, what happened just a few months ago with the drone incursion in Poland, but also constant cutting sea cables in the Baltics, that tells us all we need to know that Putin is not willing to stop this war anytime soon. He plans to put more pressure on NATO trying to show that NATO is a paper tiger and not willing and able to stop this thing.

And it's not honestly, because NATO doesn't have capacity to do that. Let's call a spade a spade, the United States is the superpower, and there are so many other powers within NATO, the problem is risk aversion and the problem that even within NATO there is still misunderstanding what constitutes a hybrid war and how we should act. Let's also not forget that this is really nothing new because this is an old KGB tactic and Putin as a trained KGB agent understands very well the nature and the importance of active measures because who has information superiority is going to win this war.

But even though that Putin was a KGB agent, let's also not forget that he was a second-rate KGB agent and we should not put him on a pedestal. He is not a great strategist. He appears to be a strategist only because we are thinking tactically and operationally when it comes to hybrid war. We have to change this, and the first thing that NATO has to do, they have to have a very clear strategy on hybrid war and that's what I'm hoping for to see in 2026.

**MONTGOMERY:** Hey Joe, I just want to add that I hope some reporters directly quote Ivana slagging off Putin, so a few more of our people added to the sanctions list, but just kind of joking there, back to you.

**DOUGHERTY:** Yeah, thanks Mark. FDD of course is sanctioned, and individuals here at FDD are sanctioned by Russia.

**STRADNER:** This was an undeniable fact because let's call a spade a spade, he was not stationed in London or anywhere else important during the Cold War, he was stationed in Dresden. I'm not even sure that he was a second rate, if you quote me, actually, you should put a third rate.

**DOUGHERTY:** Ivana coming in hot on that one. Thank you, Ivana. I do want to get back to Mark and Peter to talk a little bit about Putin and how secure he is in Russia. I know the two of you have some thoughts on there. Perhaps Peter, we'll start with you there and then over to Mark.

**DORAN:** Okay. So if you want to understand just how secure Putin is, it is critical to watch Russia's budget and economy. The economy is still operating, but let's be very frank here, Putin needs the war to continue in order to stay in power. Right now, there is a micro economy inside Russia that solely exists to not only produce weapons for their ongoing war, but to profit from it. If this war stops, the money stops. And Putin has been using the funding of this invasion to essentially buy political loyalty in Russia. So he is committed again to continuing. This is another reason why I think the Russian side has been playing President Trump for a fool. They have been stringing him along and not taking these peace negotiations seriously.

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There is no current indication that Vladimir Putin is in danger of being toppled for sure. But again, the economic incentives of continuing the invasion are so high, the only thing that can truly force Russia to stop is to cut off their oil revenue in a much more aggressive way. We have certainly taken some positive steps with our sanctions, but Russia continues to sell its oil to Turkey, to China, and yes, even to India, even though in recent months those numbers have been falling. Again, if you want to see how stable Putin is, watch the inflation, watch the budget deficit, the more this war drags on, the fewer options the Russian government and the Ministry of Finance will have for funding it. This is the softest point in which we can push and we should push harder.

**MONTGOMERY:** Thanks, and I have nothing to add to that, Joe. So back to you.

**DOUGHERTY:** Copy. Ivana some thoughts there?

**STRADNER:** Yes, I would like to add that we should actually take a look at, that last year Putin opened a statute of Joseph Stalin. And if you're wondering why I'm bothering you about some random statute in Moscow, it is precisely because almost 70% of the Russians believe that Stalin is a great leader. And with the latest report, Stalin came as a first person even above Putin, that tells you all you need to know about nationalism inside Russia. So whoever believes that after Putin Russia is going to become democracy is sorely mistaken, but it also tells me a lot why a lot of Russians are supporting this war.

My last point to where Putin stands within Russia, let's also not forget in 2022, Russia enacted a law that basically you are not even allowed to use the word "war," instead, you have to use the words "special military operation," otherwise you will end in a prison for 15 years. So a lot of Russians are really not willing to challenge the government. So I don't see any, in the future, any protests or something like that coming inside Russia. And with the latest thing where Russia announced to ban WhatsApp and Telegram and to enact their own app called Max, that's something we should follow because many Russians are not happy about that.

And finally, why does this matter? It matters because it tells us what is happening inside of Russia and why many Russians are still supporting Putin. There are still a lot of people who are not happy about the war in Ukraine, but not because Putin is waging such a war, but rather because Putin is losing. Which brings me to the conclusion that Peter put, we need to put more pressure also on economy inside Russia because that's a center of gravity for Putin.

**DOUGHERTY:** And perhaps we can flesh out that pressure point during the Q&A. But before we get to the Q&A, Mark, one final thing, I'm going to ask you, what does year five look like? What does year five look like in Ukraine? What does it look like in Russia and on the battlefield?

**MONTGOMERY:** So in Ukraine, on the battlefield, as I said, could they lose a few more square miles here and there? You bet. And will a snail crawl faster across the battlefield potentially? So there'll be some issues there. Look, I do think more and more ballistic missiles are going to land. I think it was a bad sign the other night when I don't think they tried to engage any of the ballistic missiles because they weren't headed at private targets, they're headed at critical infrastructure and the Ukrainians just had to let it hit. So there's going to be more civilian casualties, and if the Russians are vicious in they're targeting, they could really do civilian damage. So that's how I see this fifth year playing out. More testing of the military and societal resilience of Ukraine and more passing of the test by the Ukrainians.

The place I'm worried about is I just saw the reporting on, not here in Ukraine because they're going to go crazy when they read it, but in the States about factory reset on NATO, this is clinically insane. These are the talking points Vladimir Putin gave to the US in late 2021 and early 2022, "This war can go away if you stop your overseas adventurism in NATO, get out of Iraq," and at the time they meant Syria as well. "Get NATO out of Kosovo. Don't do any partnering," you know, so with Ukraine, with Japan, with Korea.

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I mean, these are Vladimir Putin talking points for a decade that he raised up heavily in 2021, 2022, and the Trump administration's embracing them as a proactive policy with no concessions? Again, who's in charge here? If I cannot believe we've allowed Steve Witkoff to come up with these ideas, but this is extremely dangerous. And at some point, by the way, the president owns these, he's foisted Witkoff on this process for a year.

One last thing I'll say, Putin poisoned, Putin owns his jail system. He put Navalny in jail for political purposes and then killed him with a poison. And we're going to hear Steve Witkoff rush into a meeting in the next month, glad hand him and him obsequiously tell us how this is a reasonable man we can work with. When did we become the country that believes that kind of demand? This is not, I said earlier today, this is not like what I expected from John Jay or John Adams or Ben Franklin when they were negotiating for our country, you know, this kind of behavior, and we're getting it from the president's sole negotiator. I hope he doesn't do the same thing the first time he meets the supreme leader. He has almost as much blood on his hands as Putin. Okay, I know I got off the talk there, but from my point of view, Ukraine doesn't lose, I don't know what we're doing in Europe and we've got to get ourselves a new lead negotiator.

**DORAN:** Joe, can I, very quickly, before we have any questions, just jump in on what Mark said because it's very topical to the peace negotiations right now. Russia wants more than an end to the war in Ukraine, Russia wants renormalization. They want to renormalize their relationships economically, their economic relationships with the United States. The Russian government has proposed this absurd angle, we could call it, of \$14 trillion dollars that perhaps the United States could potentially benefit from should we drop the sanctions and allow American companies to return to Russia. Let's recall that the Russian economy is about \$1 trillion a year. This is an absurd number. It's an absurd offer. The Russians clearly are trying to manipulate Witkoff and the negotiating team into thinking that if they accept Moscow's terms and continue to pressure Ukraine, the United States stands to benefit financially. This is a lie, it is a negotiating tactic and the United States should see through it. Most important of all, there should be no end to the sanctions, no normalization of relations with Moscow until many months or perhaps years after the Kremlin has proven that it is acting in good faith and not about to break its promises of peace. That is key and it is not being said enough in the conversation about the peace talks.

**DOUGHERTY:** Very good. Thank you, Peter. John, Mark, Ivana, we're going to move to the Q&A section of the call now. Just a quick reminder, you can use the raise-hand feature. See we've got a question coming in from Patrick. Get to that in a second, Patrick. You can also submit it into the chat and I'll be happy to read that for you. Patrick Tucker over at the Defense One over to you for the first question.

**PATRICK TUCKER:** There we go, unmuted. Hello, I'm unmuted. Thanks for doing this. I had a question on multi-domain operations using new FPVs, but also, a new class of ground robotics that Ukraine is coming out with. I know that CSIS published a report recently on new Russian concepts of operation for multi-domain use of UAVs on ground and sea and air. I wonder if you could comment a little on those and where you see those trends heading in 2026 and where you see the US, and for that matter, the EU providing assistance or serving perhaps intentionally or perhaps unintentionally as a barrier to Ukraine's objectives with their multi-domain robotic concepts of operations they're moving out with in 2026?

**MONTGOMERY:** I'll start and then pass it to John. First, you averred to it in the question. I mean, there really is dynamic work going on in Ukraine. I tend to look at it this way. This is [inaudible] eyes staring at it and it may not be completely accurate, but I see hardware associated with the US [inaudible] warfare and it strikes [inaudible]...the Russians, which is useful for not getting your butt kicked-

**DOUGHERTY:** Hey, Mark. Sorry to interrupt. You froze there for a second. Can you repeat that, what you just said a few moments ago?

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**MONTGOMERY:** Okay. So, [inaudible], which is useful because they're outnumbered and outgunned, and being [inaudible]. When the Russians beat them, like the Russians got to fiber optic drones first, it was a brutal couple months to the Ukraine [inaudible] and very tactical level. [inaudible].

**DOUGHERTY:** Hey, Mark. We're losing you again. Mark, we're losing you again. Can you drop off a video? That might be helpful. I'm sorry to do that to you.

**PATRICK TUCKER:** It is Russian counter-warfare experts, they're very advanced today.

**MONTGOMERY:** Yeah, yeah. Actually, there's a missile strike starting now. I'm fine. So, at the operational level, this is F-16s working with drones in a multi-asset attack to carve a hole in the defense systems and let F-16s get across the line of contact. So, there's a tactical and operational, and you're also talking about a strategic one, I think, which is where they go and blow crap up in the Mediterranean, right? You know what I mean?

So, I think across all three of these, we've got to let this war play out. They're being attacked at the tactical, operational and strategic level by the Russians. They're striking back in the ways they can at the tactical, operational and strategic level. They've got to do assessments of collateral damage. This is all fine and dandy till they hit what we would call in the Navy, the first white ship, right? White shipping, when they accidentally hit [inaudible] with one of their strikes. Then they're going to get pressure from Europe, but I don't think we should be pressuring them while they're successfully conducting these tactical, operational, strategic, multi-domain attacks, as long as they continue to meet the appropriate standards for the conduct of war. And so far, in my assessment, in all three areas, they have.

**DOUGHERTY:** John Hardy, over to you.

**HARDIE:** Yeah, so just maybe just narrow the scope to two trends that I've been watching and we will be watching this year. So, one is, as you may be tracking, UGVs, uncrewed ground vehicles, have been assuming a greater role in the war, especially for last-mile logistics and casualty evacuation, especially on the Russian side to a lesser degree, but growing degree on the Russian side as well. One thing I'm looking for this year is are UGVs going to be able to come into their own in the same way that UAS has over the course of this war?

And two, are they able to, especially probably the Ukrainians more so than the Russians, able to start using them in more combat rules to take some of the pressure off of infantry? So, I think right now the challenges surrounding communications with UGVs makes it really difficult to rely on them for things like assault or defending a position or whatever, which is why they're used more for the support roles I mentioned. But are the Ukrainians or even the Russians able to wrestle with that communications problem and get it reliable enough to use these in combat?

And two, on the Russian side, I think they've been able to cut in a little bit to Ukraine's overall advantage in drones, especially UAS. One thing that I think was worrying last year is we saw the Russians with Rubicon, with Judgment Day with Kronshtadt Grom, some of their more elite drone units able to put things together in a combined way with their ground assaults that made them a little more effective.

Like degrading Ukrainian logistics in concert with trying to develop a town and bleeding the Ukrainian troops and starving them of logistics inside that pocket, increasing their ability to identify and quickly target Ukrainian drone operator positions. So far, that's not enabled the Russians to graduate from these incremental advances to a greater breakthrough. But I want to keep an eye on that air littoral competition, the war within the war and see how that plays out.

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**PATRICK TUCKER:** Just like a real quick follow-up, if comms were the big barrier on ground vehicles, what does that say about future reliance on either the Russian side or the Ukrainian side on more autonomous targeting and operations, allowing maybe swarms to move out, based on on-platform computational processes, designate their own targets, hit their own targets, that sort of thing? Are they technologically, either side, really capable to do that effectively? And where do you see that going as a result of what you just described with the comms problem with ground robots? Thanks.

**HARDIE:** So, are you asking about autonomy with UGVs specifically?

**PATRICK TUCKER:** Well, actually, yeah, because that's the one you mentioned. That's the big barrier is that they don't have good comms for ground robots, so they're not as effective. So, coming off of that, UGVs specifically, but then possibly if you could broaden it to what you see as autonomy trends on either side in terms of large-scale operations for drones.

**HARDIE:** Yeah, so I think with UGVs, my understanding is that they've experimented with autonomous navigation, but it's especially difficult, I think, with UGVs for that to be reliable, so I don't think they're there yet. Although, things move pretty quickly, so maybe by a year from now it'll be more viable, I don't know. I think with autonomy in things like FPVs, for example... Well, for one you're already, you're already seeing a degree of using AI for a form of DSMAC or terrain matching for navigation for long-range drones.

For the short-range stuff, you've seen both sides. For example, the Russians using pixel-lock in their Lancet loitering missions going back to 2023. You see both sides using, with their FPV drones, their cheaper FPV drones, a degree of autonomy for the terminal guidance and striking targets. But my understanding is still Ukrainian drone operators, when they can, they prefer to have manual control because an ace pilot will be better than, for example, hitting the tank in exactly the right spot than that AI.

So, I suspect that like all things, it'll improve over time and maybe they'll come a point where it's better than an ace, but I think right now still... Maybe it's better than your entry-level pilot, but the ace is still superior.

**PATRICK TUCKER:** Thanks.

**DOUGHERTY:** Hey, Patrick, I'll get you Mark and John's email addresses. You could follow up individually if you'd like to do so after the call. Up next, we've got the Howard then we're going to go to Leo then to Tara.

So, Howard, over to you. I still see you muted there, Howard.

**HOWARD LAFRANCHI:** Are we good?

**DOUGHERTY:** We are good now. Fire away. Oh, muted again.

**HOWARD LAFRANCHI:** Okay? Good?

**DOUGHERTY:** Now, good. Yep.

**HOWARD LAFRANCHI:** Okay. I don't know why that happened. Sorry.

**DOUGHERTY:** No problem.

**HOWARD LAFRANCHI:** Anyway, first of all, I certainly agree with Mark about the resiliency and the determination of the Ukrainian people after my reporting there, but I'm also interested, in that context, what he makes of the reports up to 200,000 desertions from the military. How does that square with the resilience of the public?

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Second question, as Zelenskyy said recently that he sees that Trump wants some sort of deal or ceasefire by the summer, so he can use that going into the midterms. If that's true, what impact could that possibly have if the US is, despite all indications to the contrary, still pushing ahead to some deal?

And then, third, specifically Odesa. I've heard some analysts who have said that they think that some of the recent attacks on Odesa are just indicating, again, Putin's obsession with Odesa and concerns they were expressing, these analysts, that Odesa could be under threat this year. So, those are my three questions.

**DOUGHERTY:** Mark, start with you.

**MONTGOMERY:** Yeah, so I'll start with the last one first. Yeah, you're right, Putin does have an obsession with Odesa and he's at least going to hit it hard with missiles. I think that the Ukrainians have created a difficult path for a Russian...

There's certainly not going to be any amphibious movement and overland, that would be a significant maneuver warfare... For a Russian army that clearly demonstrated an inability to do large-scale maneuver warfare, that would be a large-scale maneuver warfare push. But as the Ukrainians get distracted, there's not unlimited Ukrainian reserves, they have created more reserves with the air strike force and air assault force reserves, assault force reserves, I think that would be tougher.

Unless there's some broader failure, systemic failure in the Ukrainian defenses, I don't think that's realistic. But I do acknowledge Putin's obsession with it. And look, I think he thought he was close. If you go back to July or August of 2023, I think he thought this is a potential... It's just not.

On the second issue of the negotiations... I cannot explain negotiating position. It's as if Steve Witkoff has not read a book that I read recently called *The Art of the Deal*, in it the author lays out, pretty aggressively, the value of leverage. I would recommend Witkoff contact the author and get a signed copy.

And then, on the third one. Now, the definition of deserter, the second you think deserter, you're like dude on the front line with a weapon, drops it and heads for Poland. There's been a small number of those. The 200,000 is about people of a draft-eligible age not returning from being overseas or people of a draft-eligible age leaving the country. I'm sure, by you're reporting, you've gone in and out. And my take on what they're inspecting for at the outbound is 18 to 24-year-old kids who might be leaving. And so, I think that there's a number of... There's a number of children or parents of children who have created the conditions where their child is unlikely to be put in the front lines and it adds up to a large number, but that's not quite the same as desertion.

They've also reorganized how they fight, how many infantry... I mean the whole thing's shifting. So, while it is worrisome and if you think that this war is going to go on to 2027, 2028, 2029, this is the Ukrainian's center of gravity, no doubt. It's not going to be weapons development. I don't think it's going to be European financial support. It's not going to be the resilience of the society. It's going to be do you have enough young men and women to be conscripted and/or volunteer to serve?

They're not using the big bonus system yet that the Russians are. You've probably seen walking around, there are some bonuses if you're underage of the normal draft, if you sign up particularly for one of the national guard corps, you can get some money, but it's a very small percentage of what the bribe/future death payment given to a family for a Russian soldier is.

**HOWARD LAFRANCHI:** Great, thank you.

**DOUGHERTY:** Thanks, Howard. Did you have anything to add there, John or Ivana, real quick, before we move over to Leo? If not ...

**STRADNER:** Go ahead, John.



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**HARDIE:** Sure. So a lot of the AWOL, I agree with Mark. It is a big problem. A lot of it, though, a significant portion of the folks who go AWOL are not leaving the military. They are transitioning, transferring between units, and often going to say a drone position. So they're net losers and takers within the Ukrainian military. And I would say one thing that the Ukrainians could work on is the Russians have an AWOL problem too, but they're better at catching these people and returning them to service. And so Ukrainians could probably do a better job with reforming their military police to tighten that net.

**STRADNER:** And for me, just a quick note on negotiations. Putin understands perfectly that President Trump is first and foremost all about business, and Putin believes that by sending Kirill Dmitriev as a Russian envoy to negotiate, talking about peace through trade, is going to resonate with Mr. Witkoff. That's absolutely a pure psychological operation.

And pay attention to an interesting thing, which is that the Russian negotiator has actually changed over the past two days. There is Medinsky's back. He's not new, he's an old negotiator, but the thing is he's a Russian historian, and you're going to hear more and more stories now pushing the Americans for territory, for Ukraine to secede territory, more historical grievances, so that's how Russia is negotiating.

And my last just point to that is the American way of thinking, and Western writ large, is always that everyone has to leave negotiations equally happy. I think it's really past time to start looking at how Eastern Europeans think about negotiations, that everyone has to leave the room equally unhappy, including Vladimir Putin. So that's something that we need to really understand, perception management, how you negotiate, how your opponent thinks and processes information.

**DOUGHERTY:** Leo, over to you.

**LEO SHANE:** Yeah, hi. Can you hear me?

**DOUGHERTY:** We can, thank you.

**LEO SHANE:** Great. I lost track of who said it earlier, but that point was brought up that Russia can stay in the fight as long as they can keep sending folks out onto the battlefield and keep their numbers up. Could someone talk just a little bit more about that? The cash flow numbers that we've seen for Russia are shocking, and are we getting to a point where even with some of the foreign folks they're bringing in, with the other areas they're looking, is this still sustainable in any way?

**DOUGHERTY:** John, you want to take a crack at that?

**HARDIE:** Yeah, sure. So the Russians over the past maybe 18 months or so have ... the way they've attacked this, they have adapted, relying on dismounted infantry, very sparingly using armored vehicles. They're falling back on their advantage, which is manpower. They're accepting the higher losses among troops in exchange for lower expenditure of equipment. Actually, last year the equipment losses between Russia and Ukraine are pretty comparable. There's rough parity. The difference is in certain types, but overall it's about the same, whereas in earlier years, much higher on the Russian side. Anyways, so we'll see how long Putin can keep that up.

If you had asked me two years ago, when Russia started really relying heavily on recruited manpower back in 2023, could they continue that through 2025 and 2026 just on a financial sense alone, I probably would've said no. So that's been surprising, but there is a limit to the number of people that are willing to basically sign a one-way ticket to go fight in Ukraine for money, and so I think you've seen the Russians scratching and clawing to keep those numbers up. Increasing financial payouts and other socioeconomic benefits, grabbing people not only from prisons but then also from the pre-trial system. Anytime you get arrested, there's some guy trying to coerce you into signing a contract.

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Leaning on conscripts, so not people signed up to fight Ukraine, but conscripts, 18 to now 30-year-olds who are not supposed to be deployed abroad, leaning on them to sign up, and putting a lot of pressure on regional and local governments to meet their quotas, so we will see how long the Russians can keep that up. As I noted earlier, it is really significant that, at least from what the Ukrainians say, they've started attriting more Russian troops than Moscow brought in in December and January. They say that's confirmed through drone footage. I don't know. I'll be trying to validate that in the months ahead.

I think the way we will notice, we'll be able to validate that, is if the Russian assault pace and scope narrows. So meaning if right now you're usually seeing like 150 to 200 assaults per day, according to general staff data from Ukraine, if that drops, or if the Russians have to narrow the number of axes on which they can attack at a high pace. So right now you have like Kupyansk, Lyman around Siversk, Tresevier, Kostyantynivka, Pokrovsk, Myrnohrad down in the south. If they have to narrow that, then that's a good indication that they are having manpower problems.

**DOUGHERTY:** Mark?

**MONTGOMERY:** No, let's just go to Tara and get the last question in.

**DOUGHERTY:** Copy. Tara, over to you.

**TARA COPP:** Hey. Thanks for doing this. I was wondering if, in your time on the ground, you had heard anything about a potential UN force and who might be willing to contribute to it, and in the negotiations if you see any possibility that U.S. forces would be part of that in any future peacekeeping force.

**MONTGOMERY:** No, I haven't heard UN. I don't know that the Ukrainians would see that as a useful tool. Weirdly then, this plenary where they might share some of President Trump's allergy. It would be pretty hypocritical for the United States to say the UN could do this, to the degree that we've been commenting very publicly on the marginal role that the UN plays in anything. And then, they actually would suck at it. I mean, that would be the final nail in the coffin, is that the UN could not do that. I've been 35 years of being around different types of peacekeeping forces, and on the ones I would not have slept well in a tent in Iraq at night, I would put UN defending me as the least likely for me to be sleeping. So no and no, and then no way are there boots on the ground.

I think there is a discussion of a future security force, and I think the distance between the security force discussions is so out of sync in so many ways with Russia's maximalist position. But if you were to eventually get to this, our [inaudible] can be air logistics, air refueling, surface logistics, that kind of stuff, ISR targeting, and then potentially air power. That would be the big negotiation point. All those other ones are easy and we're the backbone of NATO, that's what NATO [inaudible], so we do all that. Air power, we could look at them and say, "You boys have bought several hundred F-35s, several hundred F-15s, several hundred Tornados, several hundred Mirages. You can do this mission." But all the other things would have to be us for sure. And then potentially air power, just because when we bring our air power, we bring our command and control, which is a pretty useful thing as well.

**TARA COPP:** Okay, thank you.

**DOUGHERTY:** Howard, I see you've kept your hand up. Did you have a follow-up?

**HOWARD LAFRANCHI:** No, sorry about that. I meant to put it down.

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**DOUGHERTY:** That is quite okay. So yeah, we're at the top of the hour, so I think we will wrap it up. A quick reminder that we will get the transcript out as soon as we can. The link to the video here will be available shortly and I will get that to you right away, if you need to go back and check something that you might be quoting from. I do want to give each of our experts 30 seconds to summarize their thoughts, so we'll do that in just a moment, but before we do that, a couple of things.

First, you can find all of FDD's research at FDD.org. If you'd like to talk with any of our experts independently, we're happy to schedule an interview. Please reach me and my colleagues at [press@fdd.org](mailto:press@fdd.org). Some quick thank-yous to the comms team, and particularly Ellie Bufkin, for making sure everything runs smoothly, and the rest of the comms team for the great work here. Thank you to Peter, to John, to Ivana and Mark for the terrific insight. Let's get things started on the 30-second wrap-up. We're going to start with Peter, then Ivana, then John, and we'll conclude with Mark.

**DORAN:** Well, thanks so much to everyone who is joining us. Thank you, Joe. My 30-second wrap-up is this: that President Trump knows he has one war he must solve, and that is the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Without it, his presidential legacy for his second term will be diminished. However, as long as the administration continues to act as a negotiator but not understand what is driving Putin's war in the first place, taking Putin at his word and looking beyond the war, they will fail. And I fear we will continue to see the president being manipulated by the Kremlin until that change in perspective occurs.

**STRADNER:** I just want to emphasize that for Putin, this is a protracted war, and he wants to show that the West is a paper tiger and Russia, China, Iran and North Korea are building something what I love to call a multipolar world. They do not need to roll in tanks and jets into any of the Western capitals, and Russia is successfully already waging a new generation of warfare. So make no mistake, this is going to continue in 2026 where Russia will continue to challenge NATO, and I truly hope that a new strategy on hybrid warfare coming from NATO will be on the horizon soon.

**HARDIE:** Well, first thanks to everyone for joining, and thanks to Joe and the rest of the team for organizing this. I think that if I think back to December 2024, shortly after the election, Mark Montgomery and I wrote a piece in Foreign Policy basically arguing for ... I think the title was, "Make Putin Wince Before You Sit Down With Him." The idea was you bring military and economic pressure to bear, create leverage, and then go into the diplomacy. Trump unfortunately did the opposite, which is why along the way you keep seeing fits and starts of him trying to reach back for some more leverage that he never really took the chance to generate, so like the October '25 sanctions on Rosneft and Lukoil, for example.

I would love to see the United States really make a more concerted effort. Rather than just kind of one-off sanctions meant as a political signal to Russia, a really concerted economic pressure campaign coupled with maximal support for Ukrainian forces, and then couple that with diplomacy that really focuses on changing Putin's headspace. Because ultimately, we might here in the West understand that Russia is not going to succeed on the battlefield. Putin, from what I can tell, still it seems has not been disabused of the notion that he can break Ukrainian will and capacity to resist, and that continuing this war will buy real leverage.

So until we do that, until we put the military and economic conditions in place and then work on Putin in the room, when Witkoff or others are in the room with him, not being sycophants and not entertaining these ideas about Ukrainian capitulation, but telling him to his face that, "Hey, you're not going to win this, you're better off making a deal," to me, that's the recipe for actually getting to a place where Putin might be willing to compromise. Even then, I don't know, but if it's going to happen, that's probably the way

**MONTGOMERY:** I had nothing to add on the content. I'm just glad the U.S. women won the gold medal at the Olympics. But outside of that, nothing to add to these great comments. Thank you very much, guys.

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**DOUGHERTY:** Peter, Ivana, John, Mark, thank you for your terrific insight today. We'll hold, unfortunately, probably another call perhaps a year from now looking at this again, based on what you have said today. To the journalists on the call, thank you for joining us today. This does conclude today's call.