The Secret History of the War in Ukraine

This is the untold story of America's hidden role in Ukrainian military operations against Russia's invading armies.

ON A SPRING MORNING two months after Vladimir Putin's invading armies marched into Ukraine, a convoy of unmarked cars slid up to a Kyiv street corner and collected two middle-aged men in civilian clothes.
Leaving the city, the convoy — manned by British commandos, out of uniform but heavily armed — traveled 400 miles west to the Polish border. The crossing was seamless, on diplomatic passports. Farther on, they came to the Rzeszów-Jasionka Airport, where an idling C-130 cargo plane waited.

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

One of the men, Lt. Gen. Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi, remembers being led up a flight of stairs to a walkway overlooking the cavernous main hall of the garrison's Tony Bass Auditorium. Before the war, it had been a gym, used for all-hands meetings, Army band performances and Cub Scout pinewood derbies. Now General Zabrodskyi peered down on officers from coalition nations, in a warren of makeshift cubicles, organizing the first Western shipments to Ukraine of M777 artillery batteries and 155-millimeter shells.

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

Its evolution and inner workings visible to only a small circle of American and allied officials, that partnership of intelligence, strategy, planning and technology would become the secret weapon in what the Biden administration framed as its effort to both rescue Ukraine and protect the threatened post-World War II order.

Today that order — along with Ukraine's defense of its land — teeters on a knife edge, as President Trump seeks rapprochement with Mr. Putin and vows to

bring the war to a close. For the Ukrainians, the auguries are not encouraging. In the great-power contest for security and influence after the Soviet Union's collapse, a newly independent Ukraine became the nation in the middle, its Westward lean increasingly feared by Moscow. Now, with negotiations beginning, the American president has baselessly blamed the Ukrainians for starting the war, pressured them to forfeit much of their mineral wealth and asked the Ukrainians to agree to a cease-fire without a promise of concrete American security guarantees — a peace with no certainty of continued peace.

Mr. Trump has already begun to wind down elements of the partnership sealed in Wiesbaden that day in the spring of 2022. Yet to trace its history is to better understand how the Ukrainians were able to survive across three long years of war, in the face of a far larger, far more powerful enemy. It is also to see, through a secret keyhole, how the war came to today's precarious place.

With remarkable transparency, the Pentagon has offered a public inventory of the $66.5 billion array of weaponry supplied to Ukraine — including, at last count, more than a half-billion rounds of small-arms ammunition and grenades, 10,000 Javelin antiarmor weapons, 3,000 Stinger antiaircraft systems, 272 howitzers, 76 tanks, 40 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, 20 Mi-17 helicopters and three Patriot air defense batteries.

But a New York Times investigation reveals that America was woven into the war far more intimately and broadly than previously understood. At critical moments, the partnership was the backbone of Ukrainian military operations that, by U.S. counts, have killed or wounded more than 700,000 Russian soldiers. (Ukraine has put its casualty toll at 435,000.) Side by side in Wiesbaden's mission command center, American and Ukrainian officers planned Kyiv's counteroffensives. A vast American intelligence-collection effort both guided big-picture battle strategy and funneled precise targeting information down to Ukrainian soldiers in the field.

One European intelligence chief recalled being taken aback to learn how deeply enmeshed his N.A.T.O. counterparts had become in Ukrainian operations. "They are part of the kill chain now," he said.

The partnership's guiding idea was that this close cooperation might allow the Ukrainians to accomplish the unlikeliest of feats — to deliver the invading Russians a crushing blow. And in strike after successful strike in the first

chapters of the war — enabled by Ukrainian bravery and dexterity but also Russian incompetence — that underdog ambition increasingly seemed within reach.

An early proof of concept was a campaign against one of Russia's most-feared battle groups, the 58th Combined Arms Army. In mid-2022, using American intelligence and targeting information, the Ukrainians unleashed a rocket barrage at the headquarters of the 58th in the Kherson region, killing generals and staff officers inside. Again and again, the group set up at another location; each time, the Americans found it and the Ukrainians destroyed it.

Farther south, the partners set their sights on the Crimean port of Sevastopol, where the Russian Black Sea Fleet loaded missiles destined for Ukrainian targets onto warships and submarines. At the height of Ukraine's 2022 counteroffensive, a predawn swarm of maritime drones, with support from the Central Intelligence Agency, attacked the port, damaging several warships and prompting the Russians to begin pulling them back.

But ultimately the partnership strained — and the arc of the war shifted — amid rivalries, resentments and diverging imperatives and agendas.

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

Where the Americans focused on measured, achievable objectives, they saw the Ukrainians as constantly grasping for the big win, the bright, shining prize. The Ukrainians, for their part, often saw the Americans as holding them back. The Ukrainians aimed to win the war outright. Even as they shared that hope, the Americans wanted to make sure the Ukrainians didn't lose it.

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

On a tactical level, the partnership yielded triumph upon triumph. Yet at arguably the pivotal moment of the war — in mid-2023, as the Ukrainians mounted a counteroffensive to build victorious momentum after the first year's successes — the strategy devised in Wiesbaden fell victim to the fractious internal politics of Ukraine: The president, Volodymyr Zelensky, versus his military chief (and potential electoral rival), and the military chief versus his headstrong subordinate commander. When Mr. Zelensky sided with the subordinate, the Ukrainians poured vast complements of men and resources into a finally futile campaign to recapture the devastated city of Bakhmut. Within months, the entire counteroffensive ended in stillborn failure.

The partnership operated in the shadow of deepest geopolitical fear — that Mr. Putin might see it as breaching a red line of military engagement and make good on his often-brandished nuclear threats. The story of the partnership shows how close the Americans and their allies sometimes came to that red line, how increasingly dire events forced them — some said too slowly — to advance it to more perilous ground and how they carefully devised protocols to remain on the safe side of it.

Time and again, the Biden administration authorized clandestine operations it had previously prohibited. American military advisers were dispatched to Kyiv and later allowed to travel closer to the fighting. Military and C.I.A. officers in Wiesbaden helped plan and support a campaign of Ukrainian strikes in Russian-annexed Crimea. Finally, the military and then the C.I.A. received the green light to enable pinpoint strikes deep inside Russia itself.

In some ways, Ukraine was, on a wider canvas, a rematch in a long history of U.S.-Russia proxy wars — Vietnam in the 1960s, Afghanistan in the 1980s, Syria three decades later.

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

During the wars against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, American forces conducted their own ground operations and supported those of their local partners. In Ukraine, by contrast, the U.S. military wasn't allowed to deploy any of its own soldiers on the battlefield and would have to help remotely.

Would the precision targeting honed against terrorist groups be effective in a conflict with one of the most powerful militaries in the world? Would Ukrainian artillery men fire their howitzers without hesitation at coordinates sent by American officers in a headquarters 1,300 miles away? Would Ukrainian commanders, based on intelligence relayed by a disembodied American voice pleading, “There’s nobody there — go,” order infantrymen to enter a village behind enemy lines?

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

“I will never lie to you. If you lie to me, we’re done,” General Zabrodskyi recalled General Donahue telling him at their first meeting. “I feel the exact same way,” the Ukrainian replied.

Part 1February–May 2022

Building Trust — and a Killing Machine

IN MID-APRIL 2022, about two weeks before the Wiesbaden meeting, American and Ukrainian naval officers were on a routine intelligence-sharing call when something unexpected popped up on their radar screens. According to a former senior U.S. military officer, “The Americans go: ‘Oh, that’s the Moskva!’ The Ukrainians go: ‘Oh my God. Thanks a lot. Bye.’”
The Moskva was the flagship of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet. The Ukrainians sank it.

A Note on Sourcing

Over more than a year of reporting, Adam Entous conducted more than 300 interviews with current and former policymakers, Pentagon officials, intelligence officials and military officers in Ukraine, the United States, Britain and a number of other European countries. While some agreed to speak on the record, most requested that their names not be used in order to discuss sensitive military and intelligence operations.

The sinking was a signal triumph — a display of Ukrainian skill and Russian ineptitude. But the episode also reflected the disjointed state of the Ukrainian-American relationship in the first weeks of the war.

For the Americans, there was anger, because the Ukrainians hadn't given so much as a heads-up; surprise, that Ukraine possessed missiles capable of reaching the ship; and panic, because the Biden administration hadn't intended to enable the Ukrainians to attack such a potent symbol of Russian power.

The Ukrainians, for their part, were coming from their own place of deep-rooted skepticism.

Their war, as they saw it, had started in 2014, when Mr. Putin seized Crimea and fomented separatist rebellions in eastern Ukraine. President Barack Obama had condemned the seizure and imposed sanctions on Russia. But fearful that American involvement could provoke a full-scale invasion, he had authorized only strictly limited intelligence sharing and rejected calls for defensive weapons. "Blankets and night-vision goggles are important, but one cannot win a war with blankets," Ukraine's president at the time, Petro O. Poroshenko, complained. Eventually Mr. Obama somewhat relaxed those intelligence strictures, and Mr. Trump, in his first term, relaxed them further and supplied the Ukrainians with their first antitank Javelins.

Then, in the portentous days before Russia's full-scale invasion on Feb. 24, 2022, the Biden administration had closed the Kyiv embassy and pulled all military personnel from the country. (A small team of C.I.A. officers was allowed to stay.) As the Ukrainians saw it, a senior U.S. military officer said, "We told them, 'The Russians are coming — see ya.'"

When American generals offered assistance after the invasion, they ran into a wall of mistrust. "We're fighting the Russians. You're not. Why should we listen to you?" Ukraine's ground forces commander, Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrsky, told the Americans the first time they met.

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

In those early days, this meant that General Donahue and a few aides, with little more than their phones, passed information about Russian troop movements to

General Syrsky and his staff. Yet even that ad hoc arrangement touched a raw nerve of rivalry within Ukraine's military, between General Syrsky and his boss, the armed forces commander, Gen. Valery Zaluzhny. To Zaluzhny loyalists, General Syrsky was already using the relationship to build advantage.

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

In phone conversations, General Milley might second-guess the Ukrainians' equipment requests. He might dispense battlefield advice based on satellite intelligence on the screen in his Pentagon office. Next would come an awkward silence, before General Zaluzhny cut the conversation short. Sometimes he simply ignored the American's calls.

To keep them talking, the Pentagon initiated an elaborate telephone tree: A Milley aide would call Maj. Gen. David S. Baldwin, commander of the California National Guard, who would ring a wealthy Los Angeles blimp maker named Igor Pasternak, who had grown up in Lviv with Oleksii Reznikov, then Ukraine's defense minister. Mr. Reznikov would track down General Zaluzhny and tell him, according to General Baldwin, "I know you're mad at Milley, but you have to call him."

Ragtag alliance coalesced into partnership in the quick cascade of events.

In March, their assault on Kyiv stalling, the Russians reoriented their ambitions, and their war plan, surging additional forces east and south — a logistical feat the Americans thought would take months. It took two and a half weeks.

Unless the coalition reoriented its own ambitions, General Donahue and the commander of U.S. Army Europe and Africa, Gen. Christopher G. Cavoli, concluded, the hopelessly outmanned and outgunned Ukrainians would lose the war. The coalition, in other words, would have to start providing heavy offensive weapons — M777 artillery batteries and shells.

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

The defense secretary, Lloyd J. Austin III, and General Milley had put the 18th Airborne in charge of delivering weapons and advising the Ukrainians on how to use them. When President Joseph R. Biden Jr. signed on to the M777s, the Tony Bass Auditorium became a full-fledged headquarters.

A Polish general became General Donahue's deputy. A British general would manage the logistics hub on the former basketball court. A Canadian would oversee training.

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

The 18th Airborne is known as Dragon Corps; the new operation would be Task Force Dragon. All that was needed to bring the pieces together was the reluctant Ukrainian top command.

At an international conference on April 26 at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, General Milley introduced Mr. Reznikov and a Zaluzhny deputy to Generals Cavoli and Donahue. "These are your guys right here," General Milley told them, adding: "You've got to work with them. They're going to help you."

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

AT THE HEART OF THE PARTNERSHIP were two generals — the Ukrainian, Zabrodskyi, and the American, Donahue.
General Zabrodskyi would be Wiesbaden's chief Ukrainian contact, although in an unofficial capacity, as he was serving in parliament. In every other way, he was a natural.

Like many of his contemporaries in the Ukrainian military, General Zabrodskyi knew the enemy well. In the 1990s, he had attended military academy in St. Petersburg and served for five years in the Russian Army.

He also knew the Americans: From 2005 to 2006, he had studied at the Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kan. Eight years later, General Zabrodskyi led a perilous mission behind lines of Russian-backed forces in eastern Ukraine, modeled in part on one he had studied at Fort Leavenworth — the Confederate general J.E.B. Stuart's famous reconnaissance mission around Gen. George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac. This brought him to the attention of influential people at the Pentagon; the general, they sensed, was the kind of leader they could work with.

General Zabrodskyi remembers that first day in Wiesbaden: "My mission was to find out: Who is this General Donahue? What is his authority? How much can he do for us?"

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

Now he showed General Zabrodskyi and his travel companion, Maj. Gen. Oleksandr Kyrylenko, a map of the besieged east and south of their country, Russian forces dwarfing theirs. Invoking their "Glory to Ukraine" battle cry, he laid down the challenge: "You can 'Slava Ukraini' all you want with other people. I don't care how brave you are. Look at the numbers." He then walked them through a plan to win a battlefield advantage by fall, General Zabrodskyi recalled.

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

That evening, General Zabrodskyi wrote to his superiors in Kyiv.

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

SOON THE UKRAINIANS, nearly 20 in all — intelligence officers, operational planners, communications and fire-control specialists — began arriving in Wiesbaden. Every morning, officers recalled, the Ukrainians and Americans gathered to survey Russian weapons systems and ground forces and determine the ripest, highest-value targets. The priority lists were then handed over to the intelligence fusion center, where officers analyzed streams of data to pinpoint the targets' locations.

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

Some officers thought "targets" was appropriate. Others called them "intel tippers," because the Russians were often moving and the information would need verification on the ground.

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

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

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

There would be no points of interest on Russian soil. If Ukrainian commanders wanted to strike within Russia, General Zabrodskyi explained, they would have to use their own intelligence and domestically produced weapons. "Our message to the Russians was, 'This war should be fought inside Ukraine,'" a senior U.S. official said.

The White House also prohibited sharing intelligence on the locations of "strategic" Russian leaders, like the armed forces chief, Gen. Valery Gerasimov. "Imagine how that would be for us if we knew that the Russians helped some other country assassinate our chairman," another senior U.S. official said. "Like, we'd go to war." Similarly, Task Force Dragon couldn't share intelligence that identified the locations of individual Russians.

The way the system worked, Task Force Dragon would tell the Ukrainians *where* Russians were positioned. But to protect intelligence sources and methods from Russian spies, it would not say *how* it knew what it knew. All the Ukrainians would see on a secure cloud were chains of coordinates, divided into baskets — Priority 1, Priority 2 and so on. As General Zabrodskyi remembers it, when the Ukrainians asked why they should trust the intelligence, General Donahue would say: "Don't worry about how we found out. Just trust that when you shoot, it will hit it, and you'll like the results, and if you don't like the results, tell us, we'll make it better."

THE SYSTEM WENT LIVE in May. The inaugural target would be a radar-equipped armored vehicle known as a Zoopark, which the Russians could use to find weapons systems like the Ukrainians' M777s. The fusion center found a Zoopark near Russian-occupied Donetsk, in Ukraine's east. The Ukrainians would set a trap: First, they would fire toward Russian lines. When the Russians turned on the Zoopark to trace the incoming fire, the fusion center would pinpoint the Zoopark's coordinates in preparation for the strike.

On the appointed day, General Zabrodskyi recounted, General Donahue called the battalion commander with a pep talk: "You feel good?" he asked. "I feel real good," the Ukrainian responded. General Donahue then checked the satellite imagery to make sure the target and M777 were properly positioned. Only then did the artilleryman open fire, destroying the Zoopark. "Everybody went, 'We can do this!'" a U.S. official recalled.

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

That would be the battle underway north of Donetsk, in Sievierodonetsk, where the Russians were hoping to mount a pontoon-bridge river crossing and then encircle and capture the city. General Zabrodskyi called it "a hell of a target."

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

In these first months, the fighting was largely concentrated in Ukraine's east. But U.S. intelligence was also tracking Russian movements in the south, especially a large troop buildup near the major city of Kherson. Soon several M777 crews were redeployed, and Task Force Dragon started feeding points of interest to strike Russian positions there.

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

"You know when we started to believe?" General Zabrodskyi recalled. "When Donahue said, 'This is a list of positions.' We checked the list and we said, 'These 100 positions are good, but we need the other 50.' And they sent the other 50."

THE M777S BECAME WORKHORSES of the Ukrainian army. But because they generally couldn't launch their 155-millimeter shells more than 15 miles, they were no match for the Russians' vast superiority in manpower and equipment.

To give the Ukrainians compensatory advantages of precision, speed and range, Generals Cavoli and Donahue soon proposed a far bigger leap — providing High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, known as HIMARS, which used satellite-guided rockets to execute strikes up to 50 miles away.

The ensuing debate reflected the Americans' evolving thinking.

Pentagon officials were resistant, loath to deplete the Army's limited HIMARS stocks. But in May, General Cavoli visited Washington and made the case that ultimately won them over.

Celeste Wallander, then the assistant defense secretary for international security affairs, recalled, "Milley would always say, 'You've got a little Russian army fighting a big Russian army, and they're fighting the same way, and the Ukrainians will never win.'" General Cavoli's argument, she said, was that "with HIMARS, they can fight like we can, and that's how they will start to beat the Russians."

At the White House, Mr. Biden and his advisers weighed that argument against fears that pushing the Russians would only lead Mr. Putin to panic and widen the war. When the generals requested HIMARS, one official recalled, the moment felt like "standing on that line, wondering, if you take a step forward, is World War III going to break out?" And when the White House took that step forward, the official said, Task Force Dragon was becoming "the entire back office of the war."

Wiesbaden would oversee each HIMARS strike. General Donahue and his aides would review the Ukrainians' target lists and advise them on positioning their launchers and timing their strikes. The Ukrainians were supposed to only use coordinates the Americans provided. To fire a warhead, HIMARS operators needed a special electronic key card, which the Americans could deactivate anytime.

HIMARS strikes that resulted in 100 or more Russian dead or wounded came almost weekly. Russian forces were left dazed and confused. Their morale plummeted, and with it their will to fight. And as the HIMARS arsenal grew from eight to 38 and the Ukrainian strikers became more proficient, an American official said, the toll rose as much as fivefold.

"We became a small part, maybe not the best part, but a small part, of your system," General Zabrodskyi explained, adding: "Most states did this over a period of 10 years, 20 years, 30 years. But we were forced to do it in a matter of weeks."

Together the partners were honing a killing machine.

Part 2June–November 2022

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

AT THEIR FIRST MEETING, General Donahue had shown General Zabrodskyi a color-coded map of the region, with American and NATO forces in blue, Russian forces in red and Ukrainian forces in green. "Why are we green?" General Zabrodskyi asked. "We should be blue."

In early June, as they met to war-game Ukraine's counteroffensive, sitting side by side in front of tabletop battlefield maps, General Zabrodskyi saw that the small blocks marking Ukrainian positions had become blue — a symbolic stroke to strengthen the bond of common purpose. "When you defeat Russia," General Donahue told the Ukrainians, "we will make you blue for good."

It was three months since the invasion, and the maps told this story of the war:

In the south, the Ukrainians had blocked the Russian advance at the Black Sea shipbuilding center of Mykolaiv. But the Russians controlled Kherson, and a corps roughly 25,000 soldiers strong occupied land on the west bank of the Dnipro River. In the east, the Russians had been stopped at Izium. But they held land between there and the border, including the strategically important Oskil river valley.

The Russians' strategy had morphed from decapitation — the futile assault on Kyiv — to slow strangulation. The Ukrainians needed to go on the offensive.

Their top commander, General Zaluzhny, along with the British, favored the most ambitious option — from near Zaporizhzhia, in the southeast, down toward occupied Melitopol. This maneuver, they believed, would sever the cross-border land routes sustaining Russian forces in Crimea.

In theory, General Donahue agreed. But according to colleagues, he thought Melitopol was not feasible, given the state of the Ukrainian military and the coalition's limited ability to provide M777s without crippling American readiness. To prove his point in the war games, he took over the part of the Russian commander. Whenever the Ukrainians tried to advance, General Donahue destroyed them with overwhelming combat power.

What they ultimately agreed on was a two-part attack to confuse Russian commanders who, according to American intelligence, believed the Ukrainians had only enough soldiers and equipment for a single offensive.

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

General Donahue had advocated a coequal second front in the east, from the Kharkiv region, to reach the Oskil river valley. But the Ukrainians instead

argued for a smaller supporting feint to draw Russian forces east and smooth the way for Kherson.

That would come first, around Sept. 4. The Ukrainians would then begin two weeks of artillery strikes to weaken Russian forces in the south. Only then, around Sept. 18, would they march toward Kherson.

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

THAT WAS THE PLAN until it wasn’t.
Mr. Zelensky sometimes spoke directly with regional commanders, and after one such conversation, the Americans were informed that the order of battle had changed.

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

General Donahue told General Zaluzhny that more time was needed to lay the groundwork for Kherson; the switch, he said, put the counteroffensive, and the entire country, in jeopardy. The Americans later learned the back story:

Mr. Zelensky was hoping to attend the mid-September meeting of the United Nations General Assembly. A showing of progress on the battlefield, he and his advisers believed, would bolster his case for additional military support. So they upended the plan at the last minute — a preview of a fundamental disconnect that would increasingly shape the arc of the war.

The upshot wasn’t what anyone had planned.

The Russians responded by moving reinforcements from the east toward Kherson. Now General Zaluzhny realized that the weakened Russian forces in the east might well let the Ukrainians do what General Donahue had advocated — reach the Oskil river valley. “Go, go, go — you have them on the ropes,” General Donahue told the Ukrainian commander there, General Syrsky, a European official recalled.

The Russian forces collapsed even faster than predicted, abandoning their equipment as they fled. The Ukrainian leadership had never expected their

forces to reach the Oskil's west bank, and when they did, General Syrsky's standing with the president soared.

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

The Ukrainians wavered. General Donahue pleaded with the field commander, Maj. Gen. Andrii Kovalchuk, to advance. Soon the American's superiors, Generals Cavoli and Milley, escalated the matter to General Zaluzhny.

That didn't work either.

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

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

"I got this," Mr. Wallace said. The British military had considerable clout in Kyiv; unlike the Americans, they had placed small teams of officers in the country after the invasion. Now the defense minister exercised that clout and demanded that the Ukrainians oust the commander.

PERHAPS NO PIECE of Ukrainian soil was more precious to Mr. Putin than Crimea. As the Ukrainians haltingly advanced on the Dnipro, hoping to cross and advance toward the peninsula, this gave rise to what one Pentagon official called the "core tension":
To give the Russian president an incentive to negotiate a deal, the official explained, the Ukrainians would have to put pressure on Crimea. To do so, though, could push him to contemplate doing "something desperate."

The Ukrainians were already exerting pressure on the ground. And the Biden administration had authorized helping the Ukrainians develop, manufacture and deploy a nascent fleet of maritime drones to attack Russia's Black Sea Fleet. (The Americans gave the Ukrainians an early prototype meant to counter a Chinese naval assault on Taiwan.) First, the Navy was allowed to share points of interest for Russian warships just beyond Crimea's territorial waters. In October, with leeway to act within Crimea itself, the C.I.A. covertly started supporting drone strikes on the port of Sevastopol.

That same month, U.S. intelligence overheard Russia's Ukraine commander, Gen. Sergei Surovikin, talking about indeed doing something desperate: using tactical nuclear weapons to prevent the Ukrainians from crossing the Dnipro and making a beeline to Crimea.

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

That core tension seemed to be coming to a head.

In Europe, Generals Cavoli and Donahue were begging General Kovalchuk's replacement, Brig. Gen. Oleksandr Tarnavskyi, to move his brigades forward, rout the corps from the Dnipro's west bank and seize its equipment.

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

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

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

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

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

To get the Ukrainians moving, Task Force Dragon sent points of interest, and M777 operators destroyed the tanks with Excalibur missiles — time-consuming steps repeated whenever the Ukrainians encountered a Russian detachment.

The Ukrainians would still recapture Kherson and clear the Dnipro's west bank. But the offensive halted there. The Ukrainians, short on ammunition, would not

cross the Dnipro. They would not, as the Ukrainians had hoped and the Russians feared, advance toward Crimea.

And as the Russians escaped across the river, farther into occupied ground, huge machines rent the earth, cleaving long, deep trench lines in their wake.

Still the Ukrainians were in a celebratory mood, and on his next Wiesbaden trip, General Zabrodskyi presented General Donahue with a “combat souvenir”: a tactical vest that had belonged to a Russian soldier whose comrades were already marching east to what would become the crucible of 2023 — a place called Bakhmut.

Part 3November 2022–November 2023

The Best-Laid Plans

THE PLANNING for 2023 began straightaway, at what in hindsight was a moment of irrational exuberance.
Ukraine controlled the west banks of the Oskil and Dnipro rivers. Within the coalition, the prevailing wisdom was that the 2023 counteroffensive would be the war’s last: The Ukrainians would claim outright triumph, or Mr. Putin would be forced to sue for peace.

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

To accomplish this, General Zabrodskyi explained as the partners gathered in Wiesbaden in late autumn, General Zaluzhny was once again insisting that the primary effort be an offensive toward Melitopol, to strangle Russian forces in Crimea — what he believed had been the great, denied opportunity to deal the reeling enemy a knockout blow in 2022.

And once again, some American generals were preaching caution.

At the Pentagon, officials worried about their ability to supply enough weapons for the counteroffensive; perhaps the Ukrainians, in their strongest possible

position, should consider cutting a deal. When the Joint Chiefs chairman, General Milley, floated that idea in a speech, many of Ukraine's supporters (including congressional Republicans, then overwhelmingly supportive of the war) cried appeasement.

In Wiesbaden, in private conversations with General Zabrodskyi and the British, General Donahue pointed to those Russian trenches being dug to defend the south. He pointed, too, to the Ukrainians' halting advance to the Dnipro just weeks before. "They're digging in, guys," he told them. "How are you going to get across this?"

What he advocated instead, General Zabrodskyi and a European official recalled, was a pause: If the Ukrainians spent the next year, if not longer, building and training new brigades, they would be far better positioned to fight through to Melitopol.

The British, for their part, argued that if the Ukrainians were going to go anyway, the coalition needed to help them. They didn't have to be as good as the British and Americans, General Cavoli would say; they just had to be better than the Russians.

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

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

The 18th Airborne's deployment had always been temporary. There would now be a more permanent organization in Wiesbaden, the Security Assistance Group-Ukraine, call sign Erebus — the Greek mythological personification of darkness.

That autumn day, the planning session and their time together done, General Donahue escorted General Zabrodskyi to the Clay Kaserne airfield. There he presented him with an ornamental shield — the 18th Airborne dragon insignia, encircled by five stars.

The westernmost represented Wiesbaden; slightly to the east was the Rzeszów-Jasionka Airport. The other stars represented Kyiv, Kherson and Kharkiv — for General Zaluzhny and the commanders in the south and east.

And beneath the stars, “Thanks.”

“I asked him, ‘Why are you thanking me?’” General Zabrodskyi recalled. “‘I should say thank you.’”

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

Shouting through the airfield wind and noise, they went back and forth about who deserved the most thanks. Then they shook hands, and General Zabrodskyi disappeared into the idling C-130.

THE “NEW GUY IN THE ROOM” was Lt. Gen. Antonio A. Aguto Jr. He was a different kind of commander, with a different kind of mission.
General Donahue was a risk taker. General Aguto had built a reputation as a man of deliberation and master of training and large-scale operations. After the seizure of Crimea in 2014, the Obama administration had expanded its training of the Ukrainians, including at a base in the far west of the country; General Aguto had overseen the program. In Wiesbaden, his No. 1 priority would be preparing new brigades. “You’ve got to get them ready for the fight,” Mr. Austin, the defense secretary, told him.

That translated to greater autonomy for the Ukrainians, a rebalancing of the relationship: At first, Wiesbaden had labored to win the Ukrainians’ trust. Now the Ukrainians were asking for Wiesbaden’s trust.

An opportunity soon presented itself.

Ukrainian intelligence had detected a makeshift Russian barracks at a school in occupied Makiivka. “Trust us on this,” General Zabrodskyi told General Aguto. The American did, and the Ukrainian recalled, “We did the full targeting process absolutely independently.” Wiesbaden’s role would be limited to providing coordinates.

In this new phase of the partnership, U.S. and Ukrainian officers would still meet daily to set priorities, which the fusion center turned into points of interest. But Ukrainian commanders now had a freer hand to use HIMARS to

strike additional targets, fruit of their own intelligence — if they furthered agreed-upon priorities.

“We will step back and watch, and keep an eye on you to make sure that you don’t do anything crazy,” General Aguto told the Ukrainians. “The whole goal,” he added, “is to have you operate on your own at some point in time.”

ECHOING 2022, the war games of January 2023 yielded a two-pronged plan.

The secondary offensive, by General Syrsky’s forces in the east, would be focused on Bakhmut — where combat had been smoldering for months — with a feint toward the Luhansk region, an area annexed by Mr. Putin in 2022. That maneuver, the thinking went, would tie up Russian forces in the east and smooth the way for the main effort, in the south — the attack on Melitopol, where Russian fortifications were already rotting and collapsing in the winter wet and cold.

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

General Zaluzhny may have been Ukraine’s supreme commander, but his supremacy was increasingly compromised by his competition with General Syrsky. According to Ukrainian officials, the rivalry dated to Mr. Zelensky’s decision, in 2021, to elevate General Zaluzhny over his former boss, General Syrsky. The rivalry had intensified after the invasion, as the commanders vied for limited HIMARS batteries. General Syrsky had been born in Russia and served in its army; until he started working on his Ukrainian, he had generally spoken Russian at meetings. General Zaluzhny sometimes derisively called him “that Russian general.”

The Americans knew General Syrsky was unhappy about being dealt a supporting hand in the counteroffensive. When General Aguto called to make sure he understood the plan, he responded, “I don’t agree, but I have my orders.”

The counteroffensive was to begin on May 1. The intervening months would be spent training for it. General Syrsky would contribute four battle-hardened brigades — each between 3,000 and 5,000 soldiers — for training in Europe; they would be joined by four brigades of new recruits.

The general had other plans.

In Bakhmut, the Russians were deploying, and losing, vast numbers of soldiers. General Syrsky saw an opportunity to engulf them and ignite discord in their ranks. “Take all new guys” for Melitopol, he told General Aguto, according to U.S. officials. And when Mr. Zelensky sided with him, over the objections of both his own supreme commander and the Americans, a key underpinning of the counteroffensive was effectively scuttled.

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

The Ukrainian draft age was 27. General Cavoli, who had been promoted to supreme allied commander for Europe, implored General Zaluzhny to “get your 18-year-olds in the game.” But the Americans concluded that neither the president nor the general would own such a politically fraught decision.

A parallel dynamic was at play on the American side.

The previous year, the Russians had unwisely placed command posts, ammunition depots and logistics centers within 50 miles of the front lines. But new intelligence showed that the Russians had now moved critical installations beyond HIMARS’ reach. So Generals Cavoli and Aguto recommended the next quantum leap, giving the Ukrainians Army Tactical Missile Systems — missiles, known as ATACMS, that can travel up to 190 miles — to make it harder for Russian forces in Crimea to help defend Melitopol.

ATACMS were a particularly sore subject for the Biden administration. Russia’s military chief, General Gerasimov, had indirectly referred to them the previous May when he warned General Milley that anything that flew 190 miles would be breaching a red line. There was also a question of supply: The Pentagon was already warning that it would not have enough ATACMS if America had to fight its own war.

The message was blunt: Stop asking for ATACMS.

UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS had been upended. Still, the Americans saw a path to victory, albeit a narrowing one. Key to threading that needle was beginning the counteroffensive on schedule, on May 1, before the Russians repaired their fortifications and moved more troops to reinforce Melitopol.
But the drop-dead date came and went. Some promised deliveries of ammunition and equipment had been delayed, and despite General Aguto's assurances that there was enough to start, the Ukrainians wouldn't commit until they had it all.

At one point, frustration rising, General Cavoli turned to General Zabrodskyi and said: "Misha, I love your country. But if you don't do this, you're going to lose the war."

"My answer was: 'I understand what you are saying, Christopher. But please understand me. I'm not the supreme commander. And I'm not the president of Ukraine,'" General Zabrodskyi recalled, adding, "Probably I needed to cry as much as he did."

At the Pentagon, officials were beginning to sense some graver fissure opening. General Zabrodskyi recalled General Milley asking: "Tell me the truth. Did you change the plan?"

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

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

IN LATE MAY, intelligence showed the Russians rapidly building new brigades. The Ukrainians didn't have everything they wanted, but they had what they thought they needed. They would have to go.
General Zaluzhny outlined the final plan at a meeting of the Stavka, a governmental body overseeing military matters. General Tarnavskyi would have 12 brigades and the bulk of ammunition for the main assault, on Melitopol. The marine commandant, Lt. Gen. Yurii Sodol, would feint toward Mariupol, the ruined port city taken by the Russians after a withering siege the year before. General Syrsky would lead the supporting effort in the east around Bakhmut, recently lost after months of trench warfare.

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

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

Soon after, at a hastily arranged meeting on the Polish border, General Zaluzhny admitted to Generals Cavoli and Aguto that the Ukrainians had in fact decided to mount assaults in three directions at once.

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

What had happened, according to Ukrainian officials, was this: After the Stavka meeting, Mr. Zelensky had ordered that the coalition's ammunition be split evenly between General Syrsky and General Tarnavskyi. General Syrsky would also get five of the newly trained brigades, leaving seven for the Melitopol fight.

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

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

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

But they would not.

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

THE LEADER OF THE MARIUPOL ASSAULT, General Sodol, was an eager consumer of General Aguto's advice. That collaboration produced one of the counteroffensive's biggest successes: After American intelligence identified a weak point in Russian lines, General Sodol's forces, using Wiesbaden's points of interest, recaptured the village of Staromaiorske and nearly eight square miles of territory.

For the Ukrainians, that victory posed a question: Might the Mariupol fight be more promising than the one toward Melitopol? But the attack stalled for lack of manpower.

The problem was laid out right there on the battlefield map in General Aguto's office: General Syrsky's assault on Bakhmut was starving the Ukrainian army.

General Aguto urged him to send brigades and ammunition south for the Melitopol attack. But General Syrsky wouldn't budge, according to U.S. and Ukrainian officials. Nor would he budge when Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose Wagner paramilitaries had helped the Russians capture Bakhmut, rebelled against Mr. Putin's military leadership and sent forces racing toward Moscow.

U.S. intelligence assessed that the rebellion could erode Russian morale and cohesion; intercepts detected Russian commanders surprised that the Ukrainians weren't pushing harder toward tenuously defended Melitopol, a U.S. intelligence official said.

But as General Syrsky saw it, the rebellion validated his strategy of sowing division by impaling the Russians in Bakhmut. To send some of his forces south would only undercut it. "I was right, Aguto. You were wrong," an American official recalls General Syrsky saying and adding, "We're going to get to Luhansk."

Mr. Zelensky had framed Bakhmut as the "fortress of our morale." In the end, it was a blood-drenched demonstration of the outmanned Ukrainians' predicament.

Though counts vary wildly, there is little question that the Russians' casualties — in the tens of thousands — far outstripped the Ukrainians'. Yet General Syrsky never did recapture Bakhmut, never did advance toward Luhansk. And while the Russians rebuilt their brigades and soldiered on in the east, the Ukrainians had no such easy source of recruits. (Mr. Prigozhin pulled his rebels back before reaching Moscow; two months later, he died in a plane crash that American intelligence believed had the hallmarks of a Kremlin-sponsored assassination.)

Which left Melitopol.

A primary virtue of the Wiesbaden machine was speed — shrinking the time from point of interest to Ukrainian strike. But that virtue, and with it the Melitopol offensive, was undermined by a fundamental shift in how the Ukrainian commander there used those points of interest. He had substantially less ammunition than he had planned for; instead of simply firing, he would now first use drones to confirm the intelligence.

This corrosive pattern, fueled, too, by caution and a deficit of trust, came to a head when, after weeks of grindingly slow progress across a hellscape of minefields and helicopter fire, Ukrainian forces approached the occupied village of Robotyne.

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

“Take the ground now,” General Aguto told General Tarnavskyi.

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

In Wiesbaden, satellite imagery showed what looked like a Russian platoon, between 20 and 50 soldiers — to General Aguto hardly justification to slow the march.

General Tarnavskyi, though, wouldn’t move until the threat was eliminated. So Wiesbaden sent the Russians’ coordinates and advised him to simultaneously open fire and advance.

Instead, to verify the intelligence, General Tarnavskyi flew reconnaissance drones over the hilltop.

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

And after the strike, he once again dispatched his drones, to confirm the hilltop was indeed clear. Then he ordered his forces into Robotyne, which they seized on Aug. 28.

The back-and-forth had cost between 24 and 48 hours, officers estimated. And in that time, south of Robotyne, the Russians had begun building new barriers, laying mines and sending reinforcements to halt Ukrainian progress. “The situation was changed completely,” General Zabrodskyi said.

General Aguto yelled at General Tarnavskyi: Press on. But the Ukrainians had to rotate troops from the front lines to the rear, and with only the seven brigades, they weren't able to bring in new forces fast enough to keep going.

The Ukrainian advance, in fact, was slowed by a mix of factors. But in Wiesbaden, the frustrated Americans kept talking about the platoon on the hill. "A damned platoon stopped the counteroffensive," one officer remarked.

THE UKRAINIANS would not make it to Melitopol. They would have to scale back their ambitions.
Now their objective would be the small occupied city of Tokmak, about halfway to Melitopol, close to critical rail lines and roadways.

General Aguto had given the Ukrainians greater autonomy. But now he crafted a detailed artillery plan, Operation Rolling Thunder, that prescribed what the Ukrainians should shoot, with what and in what order, according to U.S. and Ukrainian officials. But General Tarnavskyi objected to some targets, insisted on using drones to verify points of interest and Rolling Thunder rumbled to a halt.

Desperate to salvage the counteroffensive, the White House had authorized a secret transport of a small number of cluster warheads with a range of about 100 miles, and General Aguto and General Zabrodskyi devised an operation against Russian attack helicopters threatening General Tarnavskyi's forces. At least 10 helicopters were destroyed, and the Russians pulled all their aircraft back to Crimea or the mainland. Still, the Ukrainians couldn't advance.

The Americans' last-ditch recommendation was to have General Syrsky take over the Tokmak fight. That was rejected. They then proposed that General Sodol send his marines to Robotyne and have them break through the Russian line. But instead General Zaluzhny ordered the marines to Kherson to open a new front in an operation the Americans counseled was doomed to fail — trying to cross the Dnipro and advance toward Crimea. The marines made it across the river in early November but ran out of men and ammunition. The counteroffensive was supposed to deliver a knockout blow. Instead, it met an inglorious end.

General Syrsky declined to answer questions about his interactions with American generals, but a spokesman for the Ukrainian armed forces said, “We do hope that the time will come, and after the victory of Ukraine, the Ukrainian and American generals you mentioned will perhaps jointly tell us about their working and friendly negotiations during the fighting against Russian aggression.”

Andriy Yermak, head of the presidential office of Ukraine and arguably the country’s second-most-powerful official, told The Times that the counteroffensive had been “primarily blunted” by the allies’ “political hesitation” and “constant” delays in weapons deliveries.

But to another senior Ukrainian official, “The real reason why we were not successful was because an improper number of forces were assigned to execute the plan.”

Either way, for the partners, the counteroffensive’s devastating outcome left bruised feelings on both sides. “The important relationships were maintained,” said Ms. Wallander, the Pentagon official. “But it was no longer the inspired and trusting brotherhood of 2022 and early 2023.”

Part 4December 2023–January 2025

Breaches of Trust, and of Borders

SHORTLY BEFORE CHRISTMAS, Mr. Zelensky rode through the Wiesbaden gates for his maiden visit to the secret center of the partnership. Entering the Tony Bass Auditorium, he was escorted past trophies of shared battle — twisted fragments of Russian vehicles, missiles and aircraft. When he climbed to the walkway above the former basketball court — as General Zabrodskyi had done that first day in 2022 — the officers working below burst into applause.

Yet the president had not come to Wiesbaden for celebration. In the shadow of the failed counteroffensive, a third, hard wartime winter coming on, the

portents had only darkened. To press their new advantage, the Russians were pouring forces into the east. In America, Mr. Trump, a Ukraine skeptic, was mid-political resurrection; some congressional Republicans were grumbling about cutting off funding.

A year ago, the coalition had been talking victory. As 2024 arrived and ground on, the Biden administration would find itself forced to keep crossing its own red lines simply to keep the Ukrainians afloat.

But first, the immediate business in Wiesbaden: Generals Cavoli and Aguto explained that they saw no plausible path to reclaiming significant territory in 2024. The coalition simply couldn't provide all the equipment for a major counteroffensive. Nor could the Ukrainians build an army big enough to mount one.

The Ukrainians would have to temper expectations, focusing on achievable objectives to stay in the fight while building the combat power to potentially mount a counteroffensive in 2025: They would need to erect defensive lines in the east to prevent the Russians from seizing more territory. And they would need to reconstitute existing brigades and fill new ones, which the coalition would help train and equip.

Mr. Zelensky voiced his support.

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

Just weeks before, the president had instructed General Zaluzhny to push the Russians back to Ukraine's 1991 borders by fall of 2024. The general had then shocked the Americans by presenting a plan to do so that required five million shells and one million drones. To which General Cavoli had responded, in fluent Russian, "From where?"

Several weeks later, at a meeting in Kyiv, the Ukrainian commander had locked General Cavoli in a Defense Ministry kitchen and, vaping furiously, made one final, futile plea. "He was caught between two fires, the first being the president and the second being the partners," said one of his aides.

As a compromise, the Americans now presented Mr. Zelensky with what they believed would constitute a statement victory — a bombing campaign, using long-range missiles and drones, to force the Russians to pull their military infrastructure out of Crimea and back into Russia. It would be code-named Operation Lunar Hail.

Until now, the Ukrainians, with help from the C.I.A. and the U.S. and British navies, had used maritime drones, together with long-range British Storm Shadow and French SCALP missiles, to strike the Black Sea Fleet. Wiesbaden's contribution was intelligence.

But to prosecute the wider Crimea campaign, the Ukrainians would need far more missiles. They would need hundreds of ATACMS.

At the Pentagon, the old cautions hadn't melted away. But after General Aguto briefed Mr. Austin on all that Lunar Hail could achieve, an aide recalled, he said: "OK, there's a really compelling strategic objective here. It isn't just about striking things."

Mr. Zelensky would get his long-pined-for ATACMS. Even so, one U.S. official said, "We knew that, in his heart of hearts, he still wanted to do something else, something more."

GENERAL ZABRODSKYI was in the Wiesbaden command center in late January when he received an urgent message and stepped outside.
When he returned, gone pale as a ghost, he led General Aguto to a balcony and, pulling on a Lucky Strike, told him that the Ukrainian leadership struggle had reached its denouement: General Zaluzhny was being fired. The betting was on his rival, General Syrsky, to ascend.

The Americans were hardly surprised; they had been hearing ample murmurings of presidential discontent. The Ukrainians would chalk it up to politics, to fear that the widely popular General Zaluzhny might challenge Mr. Zelensky for the presidency. There was also the Stavka meeting, where the president effectively kneecapped General Zaluzhny, and the general's subsequent decision to publish a piece in The Economist declaring the war at a stalemate, the Ukrainians in need of a quantum technological breakthrough. This even as his president was calling for total victory.

General Zaluzhny, one American official said, was a “dead man walking.”

General Syrsky’s appointment brought hedged relief. The Americans believed they would now have a partner with the president’s ear and trust; decision-making, they hoped, would become more consistent.

General Syrsky was also a known commodity.

Part of that knowledge, of course, was the memory of 2023, the scar of Bakhmut — the way the general had sometimes spurned their recommendations, even sought to undermine them. Still, colleagues say, Generals Cavoli and Aguto felt they understood his idiosyncrasies; he would at least hear them out, and unlike some commanders, he appreciated and typically trusted the intelligence they provided.

For General Zabrodskyi, though, the shake-up was a personal blow and a strategic unknown. He considered General Zaluzhny a friend and had given up his parliamentary seat to become his deputy for plans and operations. (Soon he would be pushed out of that job, and his Wiesbaden role. When General Aguto found out, he called with a standing invitation to his North Carolina beach house; the generals could go sailing. “Maybe in my next life,” General Zabrodskyi replied.)

And the changing of the guard came at a particularly uncertain moment for the partnership: Goaded by Mr. Trump, congressional Republicans were holding up $61 billion in new military aid. During the battle for Melitopol, the commander had insisted on using drones to validate every point of interest. Now, with far fewer rockets and shells, commanders along the front adopted the same protocol. Wiesbaden was still churning out points of interest, but the Ukrainians were barely using them.

“We don’t need this right now,” General Zabrodskyi told the Americans.

THE RED LINES kept moving.
There were the ATACMS, which arrived secretly in early spring, so the Russians wouldn’t realize Ukraine could now strike across Crimea.

And there were the SMEs. Some months earlier, General Aguto had been allowed to send a small team, about a dozen officers, to Kyiv, easing the

prohibition on American boots on Ukrainian ground. So as not to evoke memories of the American military advisers sent to South Vietnam in the slide to full-scale war, they would be known as “subject matter experts.” Then, after the Ukrainian leadership shake-up, to build confidence and coordination, the administration more than tripled the number of officers in Kyiv, to about three dozen; they could now plainly be called advisers, though they would still be confined to the Kyiv area.

Perhaps the hardest red line, though, was the Russian border. Soon that line, too, would be redrawn.

In April, the financing logjam was finally cleared, and 180 more ATACMS, dozens of armored vehicles and 85,000 155-millimeter shells started flowing in from Poland.

Coalition intelligence, though, was detecting another sort of movement: Components of a new Russian formation, the 44th Army Corps, moving toward Belgorod, just north of the Ukrainian border. The Russians, seeing a limited window as the Ukrainians waited to have the American aid in hand, were preparing to open a new front in northern Ukraine.

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

The Russian offensive exposed a fundamental asymmetry: The Russians could support their troops with artillery from just across the border; the Ukrainians couldn’t shoot back using American equipment or intelligence.

Yet with peril came opportunity. The Russians were complacent about security, believing the Americans would never let the Ukrainians fire into Russia. Entire units and their equipment were sitting unsheltered, largely undefended, in open fields.

The Ukrainians asked for permission to use U.S.-supplied weapons across the border. What’s more, Generals Cavoli and Aguto proposed that Wiesbaden help guide those strikes, as it did across Ukraine and in Crimea — providing points of interest and precision coordinates.

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

This became the moment the Biden administration changed the rules of the game. Generals Cavoli and Aguto were tasked with creating an “ops box” — a zone on Russian soil in which the Ukrainians could fire U.S.-supplied weapons and Wiesbaden could support their strikes.

At first they advocated an expansive box, to encompass a concomitant threat: the glide bombs — crude Soviet-era bombs transformed into precision weapons with wings and fins — that were raining terror on Kharkiv. A box extending about 190 miles would let the Ukrainians use their new ATACMS to hit glide-bomb fields and other targets deep inside Russia. But Mr. Austin saw this as mission creep: He did not want to divert ATACMS from Lunar Hail.

Instead, the generals were instructed to draw up two options — one extending about 50 miles into Russia, standard HIMARS range, and one nearly twice as deep. Ultimately, against the generals’ recommendation, Mr. Biden and his advisers chose the most limited option — but to protect the city of Sumy as well as Kharkiv, it followed most of the country’s northern border, encompassing an area almost as large as New Jersey. The C.I.A. was also authorized to send officers to the Kharkiv region to assist their Ukrainian counterparts with operations inside the box.

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

The unthinkable had become real. The United States was now woven into the killing of Russian soldiers on sovereign Russian soil.

SUMMER 2024: Ukraine’s armies in the north and east were stretched dangerously thin. Still, General Syrsky kept telling the Americans, “I need a win.”

A foreshadowing had come back in March, when the Americans discovered that Ukraine’s military intelligence agency, the HUR, was furtively planning a ground operation into southwest Russia. The C.I.A. station chief in Kyiv

confronted the HUR commander, Gen. Kyrylo Budanov: If he crossed into Russia, he would do so without American weapons or intelligence support. He did, only to be forced back.

At moments like these, Biden administration officials would joke bitterly that they knew more about what the Russians were planning by spying on them than about what their Ukrainian partners were planning.

To the Ukrainians, though, “don’t ask, don’t tell,” was “better than ask and stop,” explained Lt. Gen. Valeriy Kondratiuk, a former Ukrainian military intelligence commander. He added: “We are allies, but we have different goals. We protect our country, and you protect your phantom fears from the Cold War.”

In August in Wiesbaden, General Aguto’s tour was coming to its scheduled end. He left on the 9th. The same day, the Ukrainians dropped a cryptic reference to something happening in the north.

On Aug. 10, the C.I.A. station chief left, too, for a job at headquarters. In the churn of command, General Syrsky made his move — sending troops across the southwest Russian border, into the region of Kursk.

For the Americans, the incursion’s unfolding was a significant breach of trust. It wasn’t just that the Ukrainians had again kept them in the dark; they had secretly crossed a mutually agreed-upon line, taking coalition-supplied equipment into Russian territory encompassed by the ops box, in violation of rules laid down when it was created.

The box had been established to prevent a humanitarian disaster in Kharkiv, not so the Ukrainians could take advantage of it to seize Russian soil. “It wasn’t almost blackmail, it was blackmail,” a senior Pentagon official said.

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

Kursk, the Americans concluded, was the win Mr. Zelensky had been hinting at all along. It was also evidence of his calculations: He still spoke of total victory. But one of the operation’s goals, he explained to the Americans, was leverage —

to capture and hold Russian land that could be traded for Ukrainian land in future negotiations.

PROVOCATIVE OPERATIONS once forbidden were now permitted. Before General Zabrodskyi was sidelined, he and General Aguto had selected the targets for Operation Lunar Hail. The campaign required a degree of hand-holding not seen since General Donahue's day. American and British officers would oversee virtually every aspect of each strike, from determining the coordinates to calculating the missiles' flight paths.

Of roughly 100 targets across Crimea, the most coveted was the Kerch Strait Bridge, linking the peninsula to the Russian mainland. Mr. Putin saw the bridge as powerful physical proof of Crimea's connection to the motherland. Toppling the Russian president's symbol had, in turn, become the Ukrainian president's obsession.

It had also been an American red line. In 2022, the Biden administration prohibited helping the Ukrainians target it; even the approaches on the Crimean side were to be treated as sovereign Russian territory. (Ukrainian intelligence services tried attacking it themselves, causing some damage.)

But after the partners agreed on Lunar Hail, the White House authorized the military and C.I.A. to secretly work with the Ukrainians and the British on a blueprint of attack to bring the bridge down: ATACMS would weaken vulnerable points on the deck, while maritime drones would blow up next to its stanchions.

But while the drones were being readied, the Russians hardened their defenses around the stanchions.

The Ukrainians proposed attacking with ATACMS alone. Generals Cavoli and Aguto pushed back: ATACMS alone wouldn't do the job; the Ukrainians should wait until the drones were ready or call off the strike.

In the end, the Americans stood down, and in mid-August, with Wiesbaden's reluctant help, the Ukrainians fired a volley of ATACMS at the bridge. It did not come tumbling down; the strike left some "potholes," which the Russians repaired, one American official grumbled, adding, "Sometimes they need to try and fail to see that we are right."

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

For the Biden administration, the failed Kerch attack, together with a scarcity of ATACMS, reinforced the importance of helping the Ukrainians use their fleet of long-distance attack drones. The main challenge was evading Russian air defenses and pinpointing targets.

Longstanding policy barred the C.I.A. from providing intelligence on targets on Russian soil. So the administration would let the C.I.A. request “variances,” carve-outs authorizing the spy agency to support strikes inside Russia to achieve specific objectives.

Intelligence had identified a vast munitions depot in the lakeside town of Toropets, some 290 miles north of the Ukrainian border, that was providing weapons to Russian forces in Kharkiv and Kursk. The administration approved the variance. Toropets would be a test of concept.

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

On Sept. 18, a large swarm of drones slammed into the munitions depot. The blast, as powerful as a small earthquake, opened a crater the width of a football field. Videos showed immense balls of flame and plumes of smoke rising above the lake.

Yet as with the Kerch Bridge operation, the drone collaboration pointed to a strategic dissonance.

The Americans argued for concentrating drone strikes on strategically important military targets — the same sort of argument they had made, fruitlessly, about focusing on Melitopol during the 2023 counteroffensive. But the Ukrainians insisted on attacking a wider menu of targets, including oil and gas facilities and politically sensitive sites in and around Moscow (though they would do so without C.I.A. help).

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

MR. AUSTIN AND GENERAL CAVOLI traveled to Kyiv in October. Year by year, the Biden administration had provided the Ukrainians with an ever-more-sophisticated arsenal of weaponry, had crossed so many of its red lines. Still, the defense secretary and the general were worrying about the message written in the weakening situation on the ground.
The Russians had been making slow but steady progress against depleted Ukrainian forces in the east, toward the city of Pokrovsk — their “big target,” one American official called it. They were also clawing back some territory in Kursk. Yes, the Russians’ casualties had spiked, to between 1,000 and 1,500 a day. But still they kept coming.

Mr. Austin would later recount how he contemplated this manpower mismatch as he looked out the window of his armored S.U.V. snaking through the Kyiv streets. He was struck, he told aides, by the sight of so many men in their 20s, almost none of them in uniform. In a nation at war, he explained, men this age are usually away, in the fight.

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

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

Mr. Austin pressed Mr. Zelensky to take the bigger, bolder step and begin drafting 18-year-olds. To which Mr. Zelensky shot back, according to an official who was present, “Why would I draft more people? We don’t have any equipment to give them.”

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

That was the perennial standoff:

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

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

Mr. Zelensky often said, in response to the draft question, that his country was fighting for its future, that 18- to 25-year-olds were the fathers of that future.

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

GENERAL BALDWIN, who early on had crucially helped connect the partners' commanders, had visited Kyiv in September 2023. The counteroffensive was stalling, the U.S. elections were on the horizon and the Ukrainians kept asking about Afghanistan.
The Ukrainians, he recalled, were terrified that they, too, would be abandoned. They kept calling, wanting to know if America would stay the course, asking: "What will happen if the Republicans win the Congress? What is going to happen if President Trump wins?'"

He always told them to remain encouraged, he said. Still, he added, "I had my fingers crossed behind my back, because I really didn't know anymore."

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

In his last, lame-duck weeks, Mr. Biden made a flurry of moves to stay the course, at least for the moment, and shore up his Ukraine project.

He crossed his final red line — expanding the ops box to allow ATACMS and British Storm Shadow strikes into Russia — after North Korea sent thousands of troops to help the Russians dislodge the Ukrainians from Kursk. One of the first U.S.-supported strikes targeted and wounded the North Korean commander, Col. Gen. Kim Yong Bok, as he met with his Russian counterparts in a command bunker.

The administration also authorized Wiesbaden and the C.I.A. to support long-range missile and drone strikes into a section of southern Russia used as a

staging area for the assault on Pokrovsk, and allowed the military advisers to leave Kyiv for command posts closer to the fighting.

In December, General Donahue got his fourth star and returned to Wiesbaden as commander of U.S. Army Europe and Africa. He had been the last American soldier to leave in the chaotic fall of Kabul. Now he would have to navigate the new, unsure future of Ukraine.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sources and methodology

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

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