Ukraine's Kursk Incursion: Six Month Assessment

By Angelica Evans

February 6, 2025

Executive Summary: A small group of Ukrainian troops in Kursk Oblast have complicated the Russian military's efforts to advance in Ukraine over the last six months. Roughly a division's worth of Ukrainian troops have undermined the Russian military's ability to launch or renew offensive operations in lower-priority areas of the frontline and to reinforce priority efforts with elite airborne (VDV) and naval infantry units. The Ukrainian incursion in Kursk Oblast is a partial proof of concept of how limited Ukrainian battlefield activity that leverages vulnerabilities in Russia's warfighting capabilities and that integrates technological adaptations with mechanized maneuver can have theater-wide impacts on operations. It showed that surprise is still possible even on a partially transparent battlefield and that rapid maneuver is possible under the right conditions. The war in Ukraine, in other words, is not permanently stalemated. Either side can potentially restore maneuver and begin to gain or regain significant territory. Russia will be able to do so if the West reduces or cuts off aid. Ukraine may be able to do so if Western support continues to empower Ukrainian innovation.

The Russian military command has gathered around 78,000 troops, including 11,000 North Koreans, in an attempt to expel Ukrainian forces from positions in Kursk Oblast over the last six months. An estimated 11,000 Ukrainian forces advanced into Kursk Oblast in early August 2024, seizing the tactical initiative and complicating the Russian military's Fall 2024 offensive effort.[1] Russian President Vladimir Putin repeatedly delayed his deadlines for Russian forces to push Ukrainian troops from Kursk Oblast first by mid-October 2024 then by January 2025 and repeatedly prioritized Russian advances in Donetsk Oblast over regaining control of the Kursk salient, which Russian forces still had not done at the end of January 2025.[2] Putin has not been able fully to insulate Russian forces in Donetsk Oblast from the theater-wide impacts of the incursion, however, and the Russian military has simultaneously been pulling troops, armored vehicles, and artillery and air defense systems away from other sectors in Ukraine to reinforce the Russian force grouping fighting in Kursk Oblast. Recent Ukrainian estimates indicate that Putin has accumulated roughly 67,000 Russian troops and 11,000 North Korean troops in Kursk Oblast expel a reinforced Ukrainian grouping in Kursk Oblast that now constitutes at most 30,000 troops by the most generous Western estimations.[3]

Ukraine conducted the incursion at a critical moment to gain leverage in the battlespace and successfully inflicted asymmetric, theater-wide impacts on the Russian military with this limited ground operation. The first seven months of 2024 were characterized by the Russian seizure of Avdiivka in February 2024,

continued Russian offensive operations west of Avdiivka in Spring and Summer 2024, the Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast in May 2024, and intensified Russian offensive operations in the Toretsk and Kurakhove directions in June and July 2024.[4] Critical delays in Western aid over the winter of 2023-2024 created shortages in Ukraine's air defense interceptors and Ukrainian artillery units and wider vulnerabilities in Ukraine's ability to defend against Russian attacks.[5] Western leaders and intelligence agencies spent most of early 2024 advocating for Ukraine to maintain an "active defense" and focus on repelling and slowing Russian advances before attempting another counteroffensive operation possibly in 2025.[6] The Ukrainian incursion refocused the conversation and allowed Ukraine to seize the narrative and tactical initiative. The Ukrainian incursion reportedly stymied a planned Russian offensive into Sumy Oblast, prevented the Russian military from substantially reinforcing its offensive in northern Kharkiv Oblast, and complicated but failed to stop Russian advances in priority sectors of Donetsk Oblast.

Ukrainian officials have never suggested that they intended to hold positions in Kursk Oblast in perpetuity. Ukrainian officials have instead repeatedly characterized the incursion as an effort to distract and pin Russian forces away from Russia's main operational objectives in Ukraine.[7] ISW assesses as of February 5 that Russian forces had retaken at least 57 percent (roughly 655 square kilometers) of the Ukrainian salient in Kursk Oblast.[8] The Russian military certainly can expel Ukrainian forces from Russia whenever it chooses to allocate the necessary resources but has yet to prioritize this effort over making further advances in eastern Ukraine. Russian authorities may prioritize pushing Ukrainian forces from Russian territory in the coming months, however, particularly if Russian officials begin to seriously consider peace negotiations and intend to enter such negotiations from the strongest possible position. It is too early to determine the long-term impacts of the incursion on the resolution of the war in Ukraine, and these impacts will almost certainly be affected by Ukraine's ability to capitalize on the military and political pressures that the incursion has created for Russia. Ukraine may be able to replicate and exploit the pressure that Kursk has inflicted on the Russian military if the West continues to support Ukraine and if Ukraine can address its own manpower, morale, and materiel issues and identify a key location and moment to conduct a similar such operation in the future.
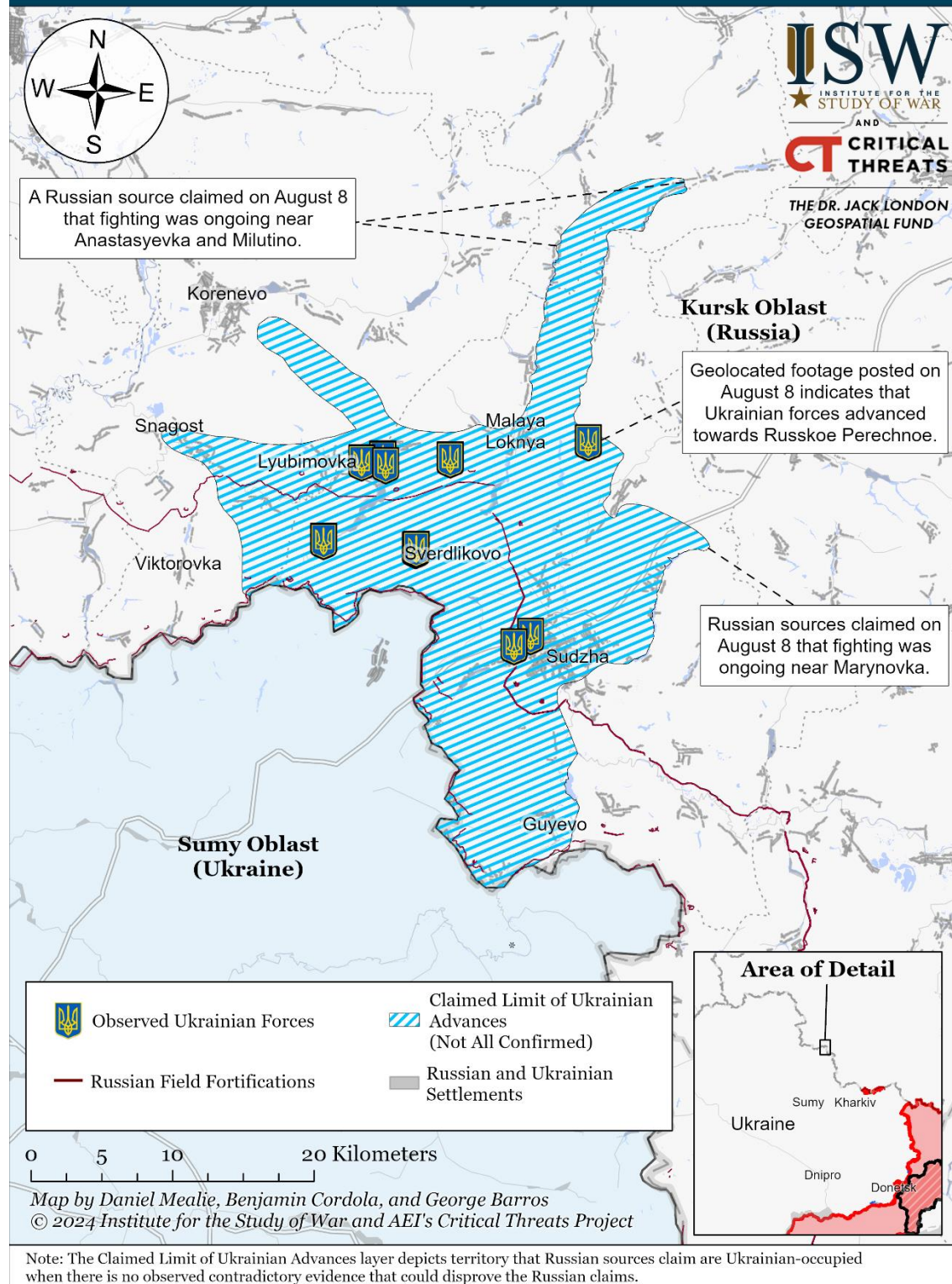
The Ukrainian Incursion into Kursk Oblast

The Russian military command has essentially treated the Russia-Ukraine international border as a dormant front of the theater since 2022 and thus failed to sufficiently fortify and man the border, leaving it vulnerable to Ukrainian attack. The Kremlin has failed to prioritize security along the international border with northern Ukraine throughout the invasion in favor of fortifying and reinforcing Russian positions in eastern and southern Ukraine.[9] The Kremlin has largely relied on Federal Security Service (FSB) border guards, Rosgvardia units, territorial defense units, and poorly trained conscripts to defend the border over the last three years.[10] Russian authorities were reportedly aware of the threat of a future Ukrainian incursion into Kursk Oblast in the months leading up to August 2024 but failed to take adequate steps to address this threat.[11] Russian territorial defense and Chechen "Akhmat" forces successfully defended against limited cross-border raids into Belgorod and Kursk oblasts by pro-Russian all-Ukrainian forces in May and June 2023 and March

2024.[12] Russian forces' ability to defend against the raids and the Kremlin's inability to imagine that Ukraine could conduct a larger cross-border operation may have reinforced the Kremlin's decision to leave the border largely unmanned and vulnerable in Summer 2024.

Putin's apparent assessment that Russian forces are still capable of conducting successful offensive operations into northern Ukraine three years into the war has also disincentivized the Kremlin from fortifying the border. Putin's decision to launch an offensive into northern Kharkiv Oblast in May 2024 indicated that he continued to believe that Russian forces are capable of making significant advances into northern Ukraine like those it made in the early days of the full-scale invasion. Ukraine's ability to contain Russia's May 2024 northern Kharkiv offensive objectively invalidated this assessment about Russian capabilities, however.[13] The Russian offensive into northern Kharkiv Oblast, in fact, further strained Russia's manpower reserves ahead of the Kursk incursion and tied up a significant number of troops from the Leningrad Military District (LMD) in Kharkiv Oblast, which complicated Russia's ability to respond to the Kursk incursion quickly.[14] The Kremlin apparently failed to internalize the lessons of its failed northern Kharkiv offensive, and Ukrainian reports that Russian forces intended to launch new offensive efforts into Sumy and Chernihiv oblasts in Summer 2024 indicate that the Kremlin continued to assess that Russian forces could successfully launch new offensive efforts into northern Ukraine despite their operational failure in Kharkiv.[15]

Ukrainian Incursion into Kursk Oblast as of August 8, 2024, 3:00 PM ET

A Russian source claimed on August 8 that fighting was ongoing near Anastasyevka and Milutino.

Korenevo

Kursk Oblast (Russia)

Geolocated footage posted on August 8 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced towards Russkoe Perechnoe.

Snagost

Malaya Loknya

Lyubimovka

Viktorovka

Sverdlikovo

Russian sources claimed on August 8 that fighting was ongoing near Marynovka.

Sudzha

Guyevo

Sumy Oblast (Ukraine)

Area of Detail

Ukraine

Sumy Kharkiv

Dnipro

Donetsk

Observed Ukrainian Forces

Russian Field Fortifications

Claimed Limit of Ukrainian Advances (Not All Confirmed)

Russian and Ukrainian Settlements

0   5   10   20 Kilometers

Map by Daniel Mealie, Benjamin Cordola, and George Barros
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Note: The Claimed Limit of Ukrainian Advances layer depicts territory that Russian sources claim are Ukrainian-occupied when there is no observed contradictory evidence that could disprove the Russian claims.

Ukrainian forces largely relied on small and maneuverable mechanized mobile groups during the initial days of the incursion in August 2024 to advance up to 35 kilometers into Kursk Oblast by exploiting the vulnerabilities along Russia's border. Ukrainian mobile groups advanced through a series of limited Russian fortifications along the international border near Nikolayevo-Darino (north of Sumy City along the international border) and Oleshnya (just northeast of Sumy City along the border) on August 6 and quickly seized the Sudzha border checkpoint south of Sudzha and captured a group of conscripts defending the checkpoint.[16] These mobile groups advanced rapidly in southern Kursk Oblast as other Ukrainian units followed behind to consolidate control of seized settlements and exploited the confusion among Russian troops during the initial days of the incursion to make rapid and deep penetrations behind Russian units.[17] Ukrainian mobile groups made rapid advances from Nikolayevo-Darino up to Korenevo (roughly 20 kilometers from the border) and from Oleshnya towards and into Sudzha (9 kilometers from the border) and further north near Malaya Loknya (12 kilometers from the border) and possibly as far as Anastasyevka (27 kilometers from the border) and Milutino (35 kilometers from the border) in the following days.[18]
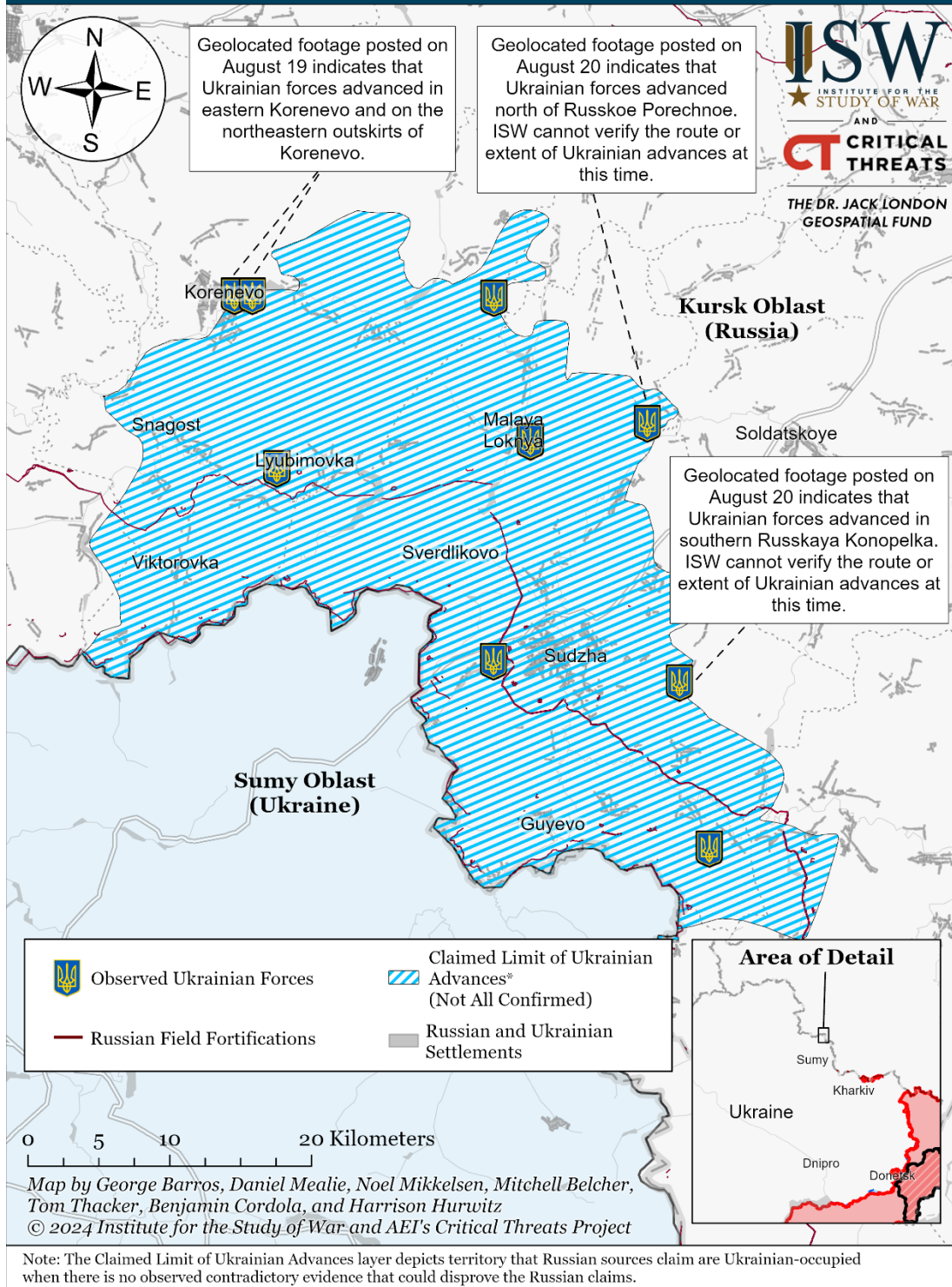
Ukrainian mobile groups also leveraged unique technological adaptations in the first days of the incursion. Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces replicated an organized pattern to advance in Kursk: first using drones to conduct reconnaissance of Russian positions; then deploying electronic warfare (EW) systems forward to prevent Russian forces from operating drones against advancing Ukrainian forces and jam Russian communications; then using high-precision first person-view (FPV) and other strike drones to target and destroy Russian positions; and finally Ukrainian mobile groups would seize these positions and hold the positions with drone support until additional Ukrainian forces arrived to consolidate.[19] Ukrainian mobile groups would then repeat this process. A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces also used drones to exert control over some roads and prevent Russian forces from advancing into settlements where Ukrainian forces did not physically hold positions.[20] Another Russian milblogger noted that advancing Ukrainian mechanized columns had significant FPV drone support and that Ukrainian forces used the drones to strike targets, protect the column, and interdict Russian routes of advance.[21] The milblogger also acknowledged that Ukrainian mobile groups were "covered" in EW to a degree that prevented Russian drone operators from reconnoitering and striking the groups and called on Russia to produce-EW resistant drones.[22] Russian forces have in response developed and employed drones attached to fiber-optic cables that are more resistant to EW but have a more limited range.[23]

Ukrainian forces successfully leveraged ambiguity about their operational intent and capabilities to maintain operational surprise and make rapid gains in Kursk Oblast, despite the fact that Russian authorities were reportedly aware of Ukrainian troop buildup in Sumy Oblast.[24] Russian sources claimed that up to 11,000 likely elite and well-trained Ukrainian troops participated in the initial incursion — a number largely consistent with Western estimates and Ukrainian reporting — and the Ukrainian military command likely surged additional troops into Kursk Oblast in the weeks and months following the initial breakthrough.[25] Ukrainian officials have previously estimated that 11,000 Russian forces (likely including conscripts, FSB border guards, and Rosgvardia

personnel) were operating in Kursk Oblast at the time of the Ukrainian incursion — meaning that Ukrainian forces made their most substantial gains into Kursk Oblast against a poorly trained and equipped but roughly equivalent Russian force grouping.[26] Russian forces were unprepared for both the time and manner in which Ukrainian forces attacked and for the innovative techniques that Ukrainian forces leveraged to integrate ground activity, air defense assets, and unmanned systems during the initial days of the incursion.[27] The current Ukrainian force grouping in Kursk Oblast is almost certainly larger than the initial incursion force but likely still significantly smaller than the estimated 78,000 Russian and North Korean troops currently operating in Kursk Oblast.[28] Russian forces were unprepared for both the time and manner in which Ukrainian forces attacked and for the innovative techniques that Ukrainian forces leveraged during the initial days of the incursion.[29]

Ukrainian Incursion into Kursk Oblast as of August 20, 2024, 3:00 PM ET

Geolocated footage posted on August 19 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced in eastern Korenevo and on the northeastern outskirts of Korenevo.

Geolocated footage posted on August 20 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced north of Russkoe Porechnoe. ISW cannot verify the route or extent of Ukrainian advances at this time.

Geolocated footage posted on August 20 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced in southern Russkaya Konopelka. ISW cannot verify the route or extent of Ukrainian advances at this time.

Kursk Oblast (Russia)

Sumy Oblast (Ukraine)

Korenevo
Snagost
Lyubimovka
Viktorovka
Malaya Loknya
Sverdlikovo
Soldatskoye
Sudzha
Guyevo

Observed Ukrainian Forces

Russian Field Fortifications

Claimed Limit of Ukrainian Advances* (Not All Confirmed)

Russian and Ukrainian Settlements

Area of Detail

Ukraine
Sumy
Kharkiv
Dnipro
Donetsk

0   5   10   20 Kilometers

Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Noel Mikkelsen, Mitchell Belcher, Tom Thacker, Benjamin Cordola, and Harrison Hurwitz
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Note: The Claimed Limit of Ukrainian Advances layer depicts territory that Russian sources claim are Ukrainian-occupied when there is no observed contradictory evidence that could disprove the Russian claims.
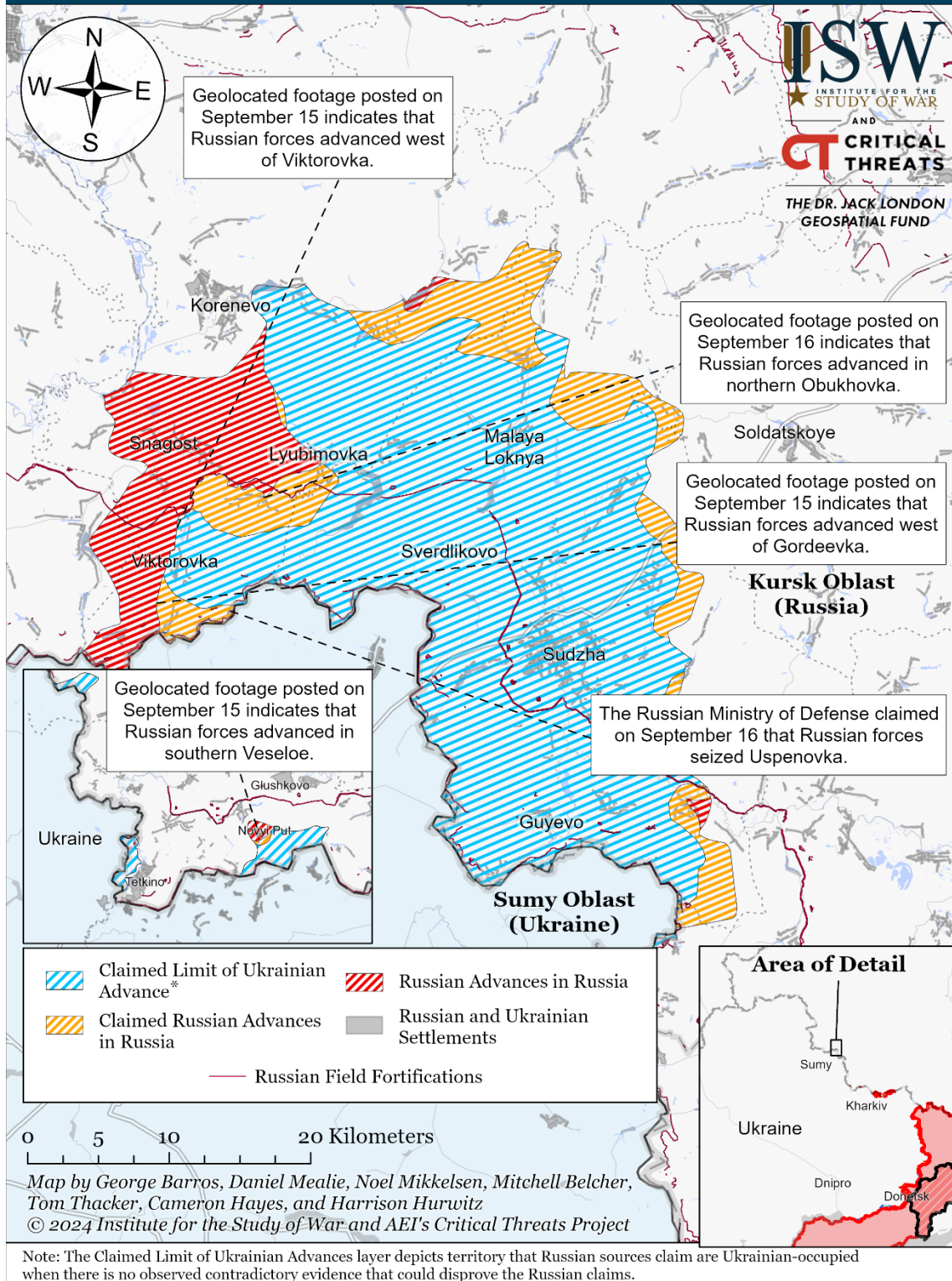
The frontline in Kursk began to stabilize as the Russian military command redeployed more forces and elements of elite units to address the incursion. Reinforced Ukrainian units continued to marginally expand and level the bounds of their salient around the Lyubimovka-Malay Loknya-Sudzha-Guyevo arc in mid-August, and Ukrainian mobile groups conducted several more limited raids further into Kursk Oblast.[30] Russian forces began to slowly stabilize the situation as additional reinforcements, including forces originally intended to fight in northern Kharkiv Oblast and lower priority frontline areas, arrived from Ukraine in late August 2024.[31] The Russian military command quickly redeployed elements of the LMD from northern Kharkiv Oblast, Chechen forces from unspecified rear or frontline areas, irregular Russian units from frontline areas including in Donetsk Oblast, and additional conscripts from garrisons within Russia — including conscripts of the 217th Airborne (VDV) Regiment (98th VDV Division).[32] The Russian military command reportedly redeployed at least a company of the 15th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Combined Arms Army [CAA], Central Military District [CMD]) from its priority offensive operation in the Pokrovsk direction to Kursk Oblast during this time — indicating that the Russian military was struggling to fully insulate its priority offensive operation from the theater-wide impacts of the Kursk incursion.[33]

The Russian military command also began redeploying elements of relatively more elite VDV and Naval Infantry units from lower priority areas of Ukraine to reinforce the force grouping in Kursk Oblast. ISW observed reports that Russian forces redeployed limited elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet); 155th Naval Infantry Brigade (Pacific Fleet, Eastern Military District [EMD]); 11th and 83rd VDV brigades; 56th VDV Regiment (7th VDV Division); 234th VDV Regiment (76th VDV Division); and 98th, 104th, and 106th VDV divisions during the first month following the incursion from Kharkiv, Donetsk, and western Zaporizhia oblasts.[34] The Russian military may have tasked more experienced units and commanders with leading poorly trained conscripts and other less experienced units in Kursk Oblast, as ISW observed footage purportedly showing elements of the 11th VDV Brigade leading conscripts out of an encirclement in an unspecified area of Kursk Oblast.[35] Ukrainian officials estimated that Russian forces had concentrated 30,000 to 45,000 personnel in Kursk Oblast as of mid-September 2024 and noted that the Russian military command intended to concentrate 60,000 to 70,000 personnel in Kursk Oblast in response to the incursion.[36]
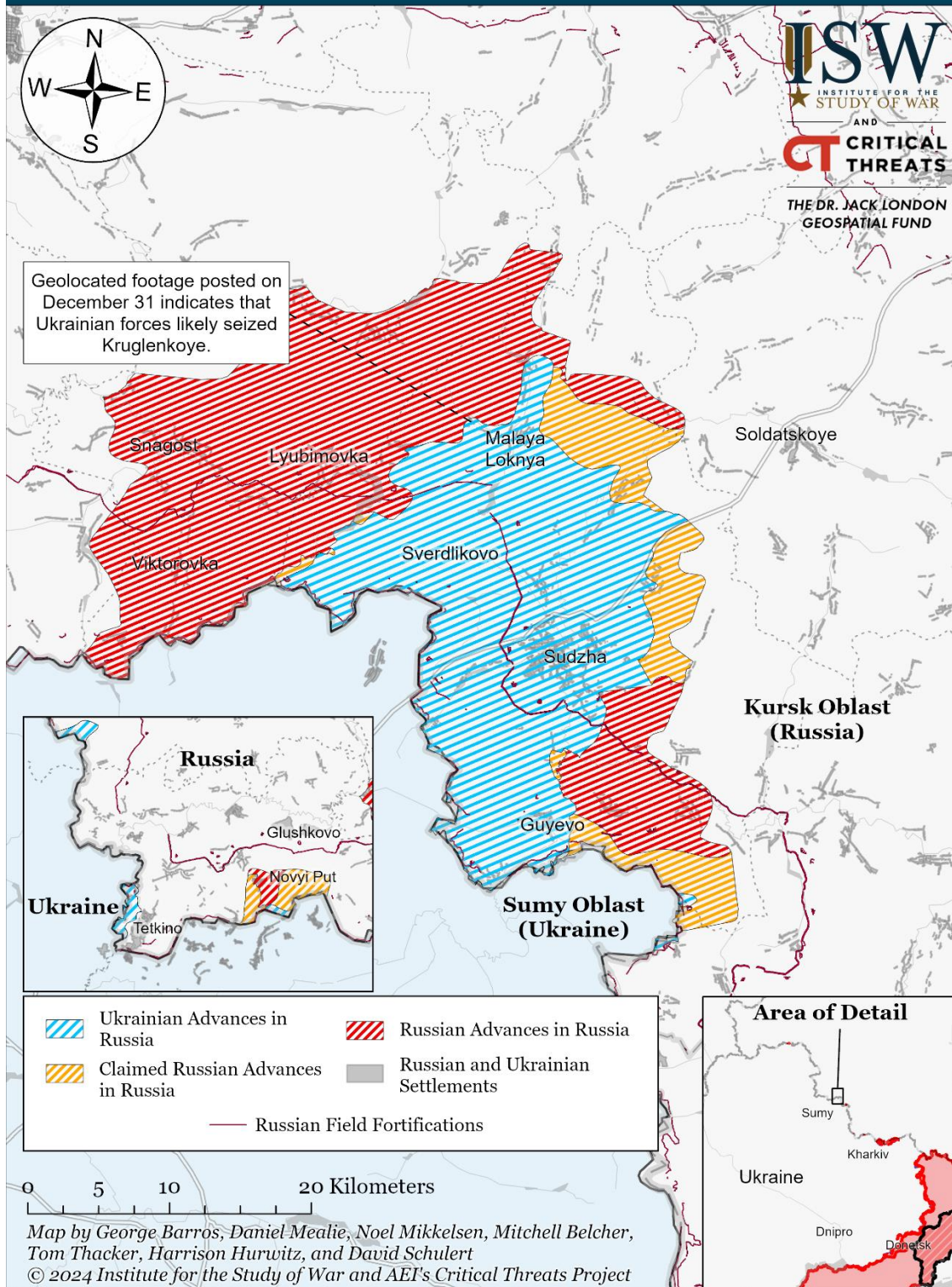
Ukrainian Incursion into Kursk Oblast as of September 16, 2024, 3:00 PM ET

Geolocated footage posted on September 15 indicates that Russian forces advanced west of Viktorovka.

Geolocated footage posted on September 16 indicates that Russian forces advanced in northern Obukhovka.

Geolocated footage posted on September 15 indicates that Russian forces advanced west of Gordeevka.

Geolocated footage posted on September 15 indicates that Russian forces advanced in southern Veseloe.

The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed on September 16 that Russian forces seized Uspenovka.

Kursk Oblast (Russia)

Sumy Oblast (Ukraine)

Ukraine

Korenevo
Snagost
Lyubimovka
Viktorovka
Malaya Loknya
Sverdlikovo
Soldatskoye
Sudzha
Guyevo
Glushkovo
Novyi Put
Tetkino

Legend:
- Claimed Limit of Ukrainian Advance*
- Claimed Russian Advances in Russia
- Russian Advances in Russia
- Russian and Ukrainian Settlements
- Russian Field Fortifications

0 5 10 20 Kilometers

Area of Detail
Sumy
Kharkiv
Ukraine
Dnipro
Donetsk

Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Noel Mikkelsen, Mitchell Belcher, Tom Thacker, Cameron Hayes, and Harrison Hurwitz
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Note: The Claimed Limit of Ukrainian Advances layer depicts territory that Russian sources claim are Ukrainian-occupied when there is no observed contradictory evidence that could disprove the Russian claims.

The reinforced Russian force grouping conducted several phrases of limited counterattacks aimed at bisecting the main Ukrainian salient in Kursk Oblast and eliminating the western part of the Ukrainian salient in Fall 2024 but struggled to make rapid gains or penetrate Ukrainian lines. Russian forces began intensified mechanized counterattacks against the western edge of the salient near Korenevo in early September 2024 and focused most of their counterattacks on the western part of the salient where Ukrainian forces had more tenuous control over the settlements.[37] ISW assessed at the time that the Russian military intended to bisect the salient and advance up to the international border southeast of Snagost and west of Sverdlikovo before refocusing to eliminate the eastern part of the Ukrainian salient around Sudzha.[38] The reinforced Russian force grouping in Kursk Oblast proved unable to conduct the kind of rapid mechanized maneuver necessary to break into and quickly bisect the salient, however. Russian forces reintensified counterattacks with several platoon- and battalion-sized mechanized assaults throughout the salient in mid- and late-October, early November, and early December 2024 but failed to make significant gains during each phase.[39] Russian forces also intensified highly attritional, infantry assaults and focused on making slow but steady gains in Kursk Oblast in November and December 2024.[40]

The Russian military command continued to redeploy additional Russian units as the intensity of Russian counterattacks ebbed and flowed in Fall 2024 and early Winter 2024-2025 and introduced roughly 11,000 to 12,000 North Korean troops into offensive operations in November 2024.[41] Russian forces have mainly used North Korean troops to conduct infantry assaults against Ukrainian positions, and North Korean troops have suffered significant losses in Kursk Oblast.[42] North Korean troops have reportedly struggled to counter Ukrainian drone and artillery strikes, which has contributed to high personnel losses.[43] The Kremlin has continued to leverage North Korean troops in Kursk in an effort to offset some of Russia's manpower needs to retake part of southern Kursk Oblast, although Russian officials including Putin have consistently denied that North Korean troops are operating in Kursk Oblast.[44] Ukrainian sources reported that the Russians had pulled the North Koreans back from the front lines by the end of January because of their heavy losses.[45]

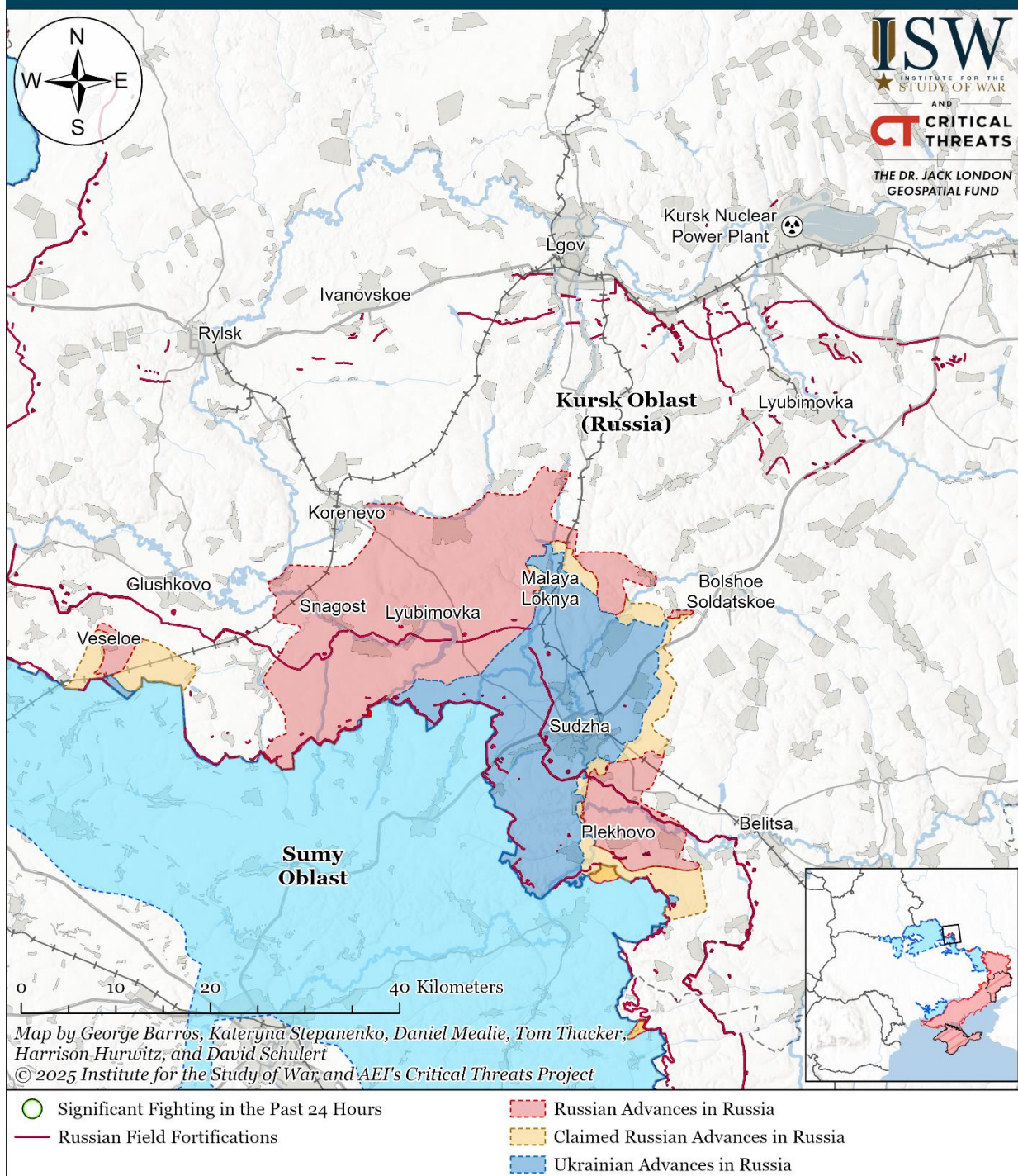**Ukrainian Incursion into Kursk Oblast as of December 31, 2024, 1:30 PM ET**

Geolocated footage posted on December 31 indicates that Ukrainian forces likely seized Kruglenkoye.

Legend:
- Ukrainian Advances in Russia
- Claimed Russian Advances in Russia
- Russian Advances in Russia
- Russian and Ukrainian Settlements
- Russian Field Fortifications

Map by George Barros, Daniel Mealie, Noel Mikkelsen, Mitchell Belcher, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, and David Schulert
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Russian forces reintensified their efforts to push Ukrainian forces from the remainder of the salient for a fourth time in January 2025 but were still struggling to break into Sudzha as of this writing. Ukrainian forces temporarily reintensified offensive operations in Kursk Oblast on January 5 and 6 but failed to make and hold gains northeast of Sudzha.[46] Russian forces conducted several company- and battalion-sized mechanized assaults that resulted in marginal gains in January but have largely continued to conduct costly infantry attacks in Kursk Oblast.[47] Russian forces have intensified assaults west of Sudzha near Sverdlikovo, immediately east of Sudzha, and south of Sudzha itself — likely in preparation for a future offensive operation to retake the town itself.[48]

Ukrainian forces also conducted several strikes against Russian frontline positions, command posts, and military bases in Kursk Oblast in late December 2024 and January 2025 in order to complicate Russian command and control (C2) in the area. A December 30, 2024 Ukrainian strike against a Russian 76th VDV Division main command post in Lgov, Kursk Oblast reportedly killed eight senior commanders and wounded 20 personnel.[49] Ukrainian forces also targeted a Russian military base in Kursk City on January 6 and struck a main command post of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade in Belaya, Kursk Oblast on January 7.[50] The Ukrainian General Staff reported on January 31 that Ukrainian forces destroyed a Russian command post in Rylsk, Kursk Oblast and noted that the strike is part of a systemic operation to destroy Russian command posts in the area.[51]

Assessed Control of Terrain in the Kursk Direction February 1, 2025 at 1:30 PM EST

Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Daniel Mealie, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, and David Schulert
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○ Significant Fighting in the Past 24 Hours
— Russian Field Fortifications
▨ Russian Advances in Russia
▨ Claimed Russian Advances in Russia
▨ Ukrainian Advances in Russia

Russian forces may struggle to re-take Sudzha should Ukrainian forces choose to defend the town, but Russian forces are almost certainly capable of retaking the remainder of Kursk Oblast in the coming months. US officials estimated in August 2024 that Russia likely needs 15 to 20 brigades — at least 50,000

troops, including a significant number redeployed from Ukraine or Russia's operational reserves - to retake Kursk Oblast.[52] Ukrainian sources estimated that Russian forces had accumulated over 50,000 troops in Kursk Oblast as of late November 2024 ahead of concerted counteroffensive operations to retake the remainder of Kursk Oblast by late January 2025, and the Russian military command has only further reinforced this grouping.[53] Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Oleksandr Syrskyi estimated on January 20 that Russian forces have concentrated 67,000 Russian troops and 11,000 North Korean troops in Kursk Oblast.[54] This overwhelming Russian force grouping is almost certainly capable of pushing Ukrainian forces from their remaining positions in Kursk Oblast in the coming months, but it remains unclear if the Russian military command will continue to prioritize further advances in Donetsk Oblast over the liberation of Kursk's border areas if the Russian forces in Kursk continue to struggle.

Implications

ISW is not prepared to assess the long-term impacts of the Ukrainian incursion into Kursk Oblast at this time but will consider the short- to medium-term impacts of the incursion and implications of Ukraine's ability to inflict asymmetric consequences on the Russian military.

The Ukrainian incursion reportedly spoiled several Russian plans to attack into northern Ukraine and complicated Russian efforts to intensify offensive operations in northern Kharkiv, Donetsk, and Zaporizhia oblasts. Zelensky and other Ukrainian officials warned as early as March 2024 that the Russian military command intended to conduct an offensive operation into northern Sumy or Kharkiv Oblast in Summer 2024.[55] Russian forces likely retained an interest in attacking Sumy Oblast after and amid the Russian offensive in northern Kharkiv Oblast. Mikhail Zvinchuk, founder of the Kremlin-affiliated *Rybar* Telegram channel, called for Russian forces to seize areas of Sumy and Chernihiv oblasts, and Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin explicitly called for Russia to seize Sumy City in May 2024.[56] Zelensky has repeatedly noted that the Ukrainian incursion stopped Russian plans to advance into several areas of northern Ukraine, including Sumy Oblast, and seize both Sumy and Kharkiv cities.[57]

The Russian offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast had already culminated by the time Ukrainian forces launched the August 2024 incursion, but significant redeployments from the northern Kharkiv direction and from Russia's operational reserves intended to reinforce in northern Kharkiv Oblast likely prevented Russian forces from reintensifying offensive operations in the area in Fall 2024.[58] Ukrainian officials noted in November 2024 that Russian forces intended to renew offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and the redeployment of VDV troops and other Russian forces from Zaporizhia Oblast may have delayed this Russian plan.[59] Russian attacks into northern Ukraine and the reintensification of Russian offensive operations in northern Kharkiv Oblast and western Zaporizhia Oblast would have contributed to Russian efforts to stretch and penetrate Ukrainian defensive lines throughout the theater.[60] Ukrainian forces instead conducted a spoiling attack into Kursk Oblast and seized the battlefield initiative in this sector of the frontline.

Limited redeployments from frontline Russian units in priority areas of Donetsk Oblast, including the Pokrovsk direction, and larger redeployments from operational reserves
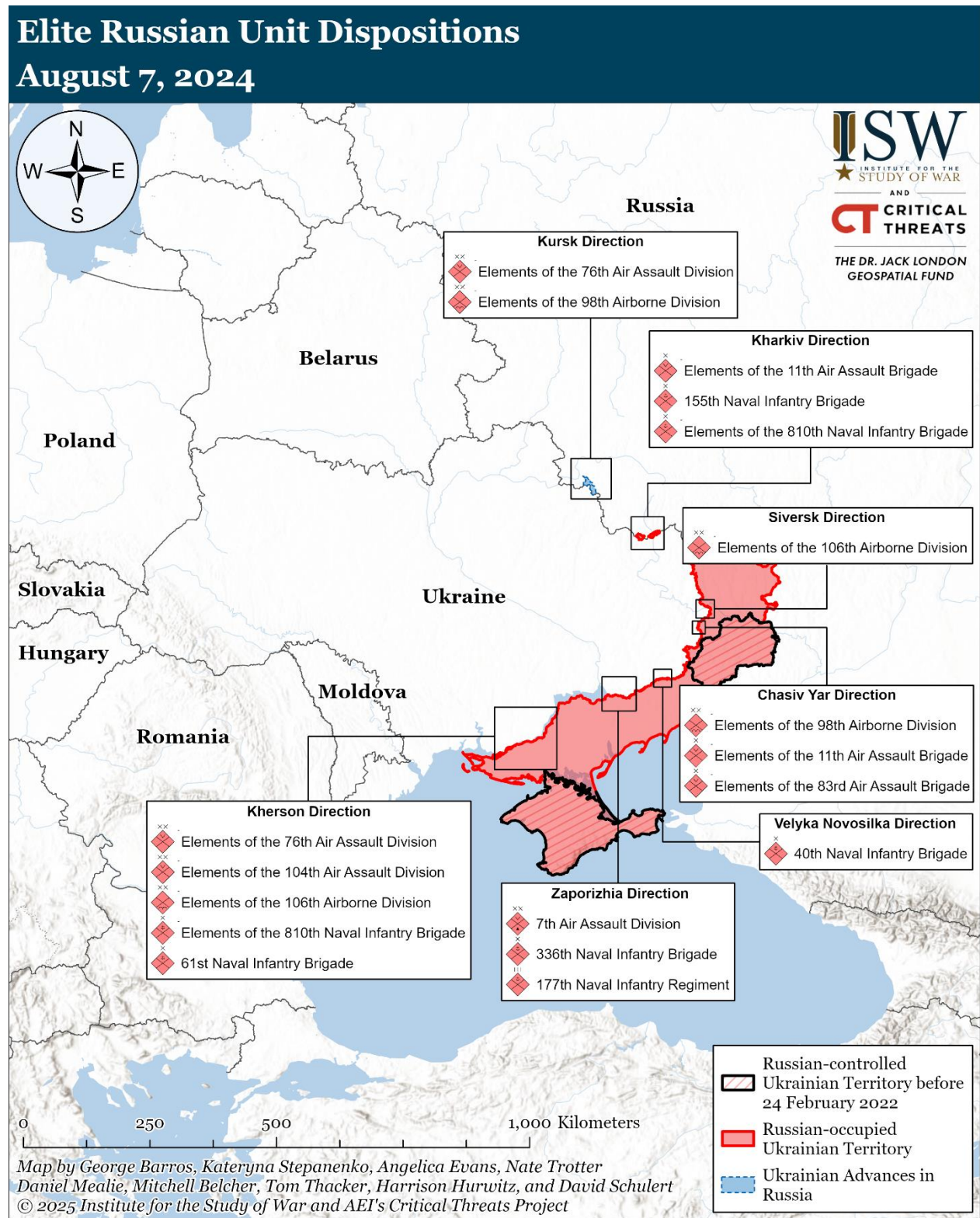
intended to reinforce the Pokrovsk direction did not stop Russian gains in these areas but likely slowed these gains and may have forced the Russian military command to reevaluate their objectives in the area.[61] Russian milbloggers acknowledged in September 2024 that the Ukrainian incursion prompted manpower constraints that forced the Russian military command to adjust its plans in Donetsk Oblast.[62] ISW has previously noted that many of the Russian units redeployed from lower priority sectors of the frontline to Kursk Oblast could have served as reinforcements for the Russian military's priority offensive operations in the Pokrovsk direction and western Donetsk Oblast.[63] The recent deployment of Russian units from the Kurakhove direction to the Pokrovsk direction indicates that the Russian military command is actively seeking to reinforce offensive operations in the Pokrovsk direction at the expense of other very active areas of the frontline and would likely have preferred to redeploy available forces, especially VDV or naval infantry elements, from lower priority frontline areas to Pokrovsk had they been available.[64]

The pressures that the incursion placed on Russian offensive operations in Ukraine highlight the reality that Russia does not have the reserves necessary to rapidly respond to unexpected Ukrainian activity in one sector without limiting or deprioritizing offensive operations in another sector. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets estimated in June 2024 that Russia had at most 60,000 personnel in its operational reserves and stated in October 2024 that the Russian military command originally intended to commit most of these forces to the Kharkiv and Toretsk-Pokrovsk-Kurakhove directions.[65] The Ukrainian incursion complicated this plan and US officials noted in August 2024 that Russia committed a significant portion of its operational reserves to slowing and containing the initial Ukrainian incursion force in Kursk Oblast.[66] The Kremlin is attempting to use North Korean forces to reinforce offensive operations in Kursk Oblast and offset limitations in Russia's domestic force generation capacity, but the North Korean deployment is currently too small to free up a significant number of Russian troops to return to Ukraine.[67] North Korea reportedly intends to deploy new military personnel to Russia by mid-March 2025, but it is unclear if these new forces constitute a rotation or additional deployment of forces, especially considering the reportedly very high losses the North Korean units in Russia have already sustained.[68]

The fact that the Russian military command had reportedly designated its reserves to support specific sectors rather than being available to support anywhere in the theater indicates that these were operational level reserves. The Russian military does not appear to have a pool of strategic level reserves that could be committed anywhere along the frontline and instead seems to be prioritizing forming operational level reserves intended specifically for priority directions. Russia's lack of strategic level reserves has contributed to its slow response to the Ukrainian incursion and currently appears to be hindering Russia's efforts to reinforce Russian units to exploit tactical gains in the Chasiv Yar, Toretsk, and Velyka Novosilka directions and to exploit Ukrainian vulnerabilities in the Pokrovsk direction.

Elite Russian Unit Dispositions
August 7, 2024

Kursk Direction
Elements of the 76th Air Assault Division
Elements of the 98th Airborne Division

Kharkiv Direction
Elements of the 11th Air Assault Brigade
155th Naval Infantry Brigade
Elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade

Siversk Direction
Elements of the 106th Airborne Division

Chasiv Yar Direction
Elements of the 98th Airborne Division
Elements of the 11th Air Assault Brigade
Elements of the 83rd Air Assault Brigade

Velyka Novosilka Direction
40th Naval Infantry Brigade

Kherson Direction
Elements of the 76th Air Assault Division
Elements of the 104th Air Assault Division
Elements of the 106th Airborne Division
Elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade
61st Naval Infantry Brigade

Zaporizhia Direction
7th Air Assault Division
336th Naval Infantry Brigade
177th Naval Infantry Regiment

Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before 24 February 2022
Russian-occupied Ukrainian Territory
Ukrainian Advances in Russia

0 250 500 1,000 Kilometers

Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angelica Evans, Nate Trotter
Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, and David Schulert
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The incursion pinned elite VDV and NI units in Kursk and has prevented them from redeploying to priority sectors of the frontline. The Russian military command generally regards VDV and naval infantry elements as "elite" forces (even though many Russian elite units have lost their eliteness over the course of the Russian

full-scale invasion of Ukraine) and tends to deploy these forces in critical directions.[69] The Russian military command reportedly redeployed elements of each of the seven VDV formations and four of the six naval infantry formations from frontline positions in Ukraine to Kursk Oblast in the months following the incursion. ISW observed repeated reports that Russia redeployed elements of at least one regiment of both the 7th and 76th VDV divisions likely from Kherson and western Zaporizhia oblasts, elements of two regiments of the 106th VDV Division likely from the Siversk direction, elements of both the 11th and 83rd VDV brigades from the Chasiv Yar or Kharkiv directions, and limited elements of the 98th VDV Division from the Chasiv Yar direction and at least one report that Russian forces redeployed up to two battalions of the 104th VDV Division from the Kherson direction.[70] The Russian military command appears to have redeployed most of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade and limited elements of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade, 40th Naval Infantry Brigade (Pacific Fleet, EMD), and 177th Naval Infantry Regiment (Caspian Flotilla) from Kharkiv, Donetsk, western Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts.[71]

Elite Russian Unit Dispositions
January 23, 2025

Kursk Direction
Elements of the 7th Air Assault Division
Elements of the 76th Air Assault Division
Elements of the 98th Airborne Division
Elements of the 104th Air Assault Division
Elements of the 106th Airborne Division
11th Air Assault Brigade
83rd Air Assault Brigade
Elements of the 40th Naval Infantry Brigade
155th Naval Infantry Brigade
810th Naval Infantry Brigade
177th Naval Infantry Regiment

Siversk Direction
Elements of the 106th Airborne Division

Chasiv Yar Direction
Elements of the 98th Airborne Division

Kherson Direction
Elements of the 104th Air Assault Division
61st Naval Infantry Brigade

Velyka Novosilka Direction
Elements of the 40th Naval Infantry Brigade
336th Naval Infantry Brigade

Zaporizhia Direction
Elements of the 7th Air Assault Division
Elements of the 76th Air Assault Division

Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before 24 February 2022
Russian-occupied Ukrainian Territory
Ukrainian Advances in Russia

Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Angelica Evans, Nate Trotter Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, Tom Thacker, Harrison Hurwitz, and David Schulert
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Most of these VDV and naval infantry units are split between Kursk and frontline areas of Ukraine as of January 2025, including some higher priority areas such as the Chasiv Yar and Velyka Novosilka directions.[72] Elements of the 40th Naval Infantry Brigade participated in the seizure of Velyka Novosilka in late January 2025, and elements of the 98th VDV Division are currently engaged in Russian efforts to seize Chasiv Yar and eventually pressure the Ukrainian fortress belt in Donetsk Oblast.[73] The redeployment

of these forces is another indication that the Russian military failed to insulate higher priority sectors of the frontline from the theater-wide impacts of the Ukrainian incursion.

The Ukrainian incursion has likely also drawn a notable amount of materiel from Russian operations in Ukraine. Russian forces have conducted at least three battalion-sized mechanized assaults, several company-sized mechanized assaults, and several dozen platoon-sized mechanized assaults in the last six months in Kursk Oblast and sustained notable armored vehicle losses during most of the assaults.[74] The Russian military command is reinforcing its units in Kursk Oblast from Russia's shrinking Soviet-era tank and armored vehicle stocks and rearming these units is drawing materiel away from Ukraine.[75] Zelensky noted in September 2024 that Russian forces have also redirected artillery ammunition from Ukraine to defensive operations in Kursk Oblast.[76] Russian officials acknowledged in August 2024 that they redeployed additional drone supplies, mobile electronic warfare (EW) systems, radios, and radio jammers to the Russian force grouping.[77] The Russian military command also appears to have redeployed elements of the 98th VDV Division's 5th Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment to Kursk Oblast, highlighting the fact that the incursion has also forced Russia to redeploy some air defense assets to defend its force grouping in Kursk Oblast.[78]

Conclusion

The incursion has highlighted how Ukraine can exploit vulnerabilities in Russia's manpower reserves and theater-wide campaign design to exert limited control over Russian battlefield activity in Ukraine and generate strategically significant informational and political pressures on Russia. Ukraine's campaign in Kursk Oblast demonstrates that surprise is still possible on the partially transparent battlefield of Ukraine — where an adversary can observe force concentrations but not reliably discern an enemy's operational intent and capabilities.[79] ISW previously noted that a key requirement of surprise is that the enemy must be unprepared to respond effectively, and Ukrainian forces were able to successfully obscure their operational intent and quickly integrate technological adaptations with mechanized maneuver to overwhelm the limited Russian force grouping in Kursk Oblast in the early days of the incursion.[80] Putin's unwillingness to acknowledge the shifting strategic realities of the war in Ukraine played well into these efforts — as Putin continues to underestimate both Ukrainian capabilities and will, which creates blind spots in Russia's ability to plan for and respond to Ukrainian operations.

The Ukrainian incursion showed the asymmetric impacts that Ukrainian forces can generate by successfully integrating technological adaptations with ground maneuver. Russian forces are still struggling to counter Ukrainian electronic warfare (EW) interference in Kursk Oblast, and Ukrainian forces could replicate this level of EW interference in Ukraine by concentrating a significant number of these systems in select frontline areas.[81] Ukrainian forces appear to be attempting to replicate the complicating effects of strikes on tactical and main command posts in Donetsk Oblast, and recently conducted strikes against command posts of the 29th Combined Arms Army (CAA) (EMD), 2nd CAA (Central Military District [CMD]), 8th CAA (Southern Military District [SMD]), and 3rd Army Corps (AC) (CMD) in early and mid-January 2024.[82] ISW has previously noted that Ukrainian drone operators have played a significant role in limiting Russian mechanized maneuver in Ukraine, and drone operators have also

helped in slowing and complicating Russian mechanized and infantry counterattacks in Kursk Oblast.[83]

The limited Ukrainian force grouping that attacked into Kursk Oblast was able to generate significantly greater strategic level impacts than these forces could have achieved defending within Ukraine. The operational and strategic significance of Ukrainian territorial gains in Kursk Oblast is not due to the significance of the territory itself. These gains have never challenged Kursk City or any significant Russian military base or defensive position — much less threatened to militarily topple Putin's regime - but have rather inflicted significant military, political, and informational pressure on the Kremlin. Putin's decision to use conscripts to respond to the incursion and the six-month-long evacuation of residents of Kursk's border areas and subsequent protests, as a result, have generated domestic instability and ongoing demands for Russian forces to retake the remainder of Kursk Oblast soon.[84] Putin's reliance on foreign troops to liberate Russian territory — something a Russian leader has never done in history — is also negatively impacting Putin's image as the defender and stabilizer of Russia after the 1990s. The Ukrainian incursion has also undermined Putin's narrative that Russian victory in Ukraine is inevitable and reminded the world that victory often favors the innovator and that the end state of the war in Ukraine remains unclear.[85]

The Ukrainian incursion challenges the assumption that the war is permanently stalemated and highlights the fact that both Russia and Ukraine maintain the ability to shift battlefield realities with well planned and executed offensive operations. Ukraine's ability to identify and expose a vulnerability in Russia's defenses along the international border allowed Ukrainian forces to temporarily seize significant territory in Russia and generate strategic effects on the Russian military and Putin's regime. Ukrainian forces have demonstrated their ability to exploit immediate tactical successes in vulnerable areas with well-trained and provisioned troops, technological adaptations, and mechanized maneuver that offset theater-wide Russian manpower and materiel advantages. Russian forces have significantly fortified and manned large sectors of the frontline, particularly in Donetsk and western Zaporizhia Oblast, but the Russian military is unable to defend every sector of the thousand-kilometer-long frontline equally. There are likely vulnerable areas throughout the frontline in Ukraine that Ukrainian forces can exploit in the future, although even the most vulnerable frontline areas in Ukraine are likely significantly more well-fortified and manned than was the international border in August 2024. ISW has previously observed that both Russia and Ukraine lack the capability to conduct individual decisive war-winning operations and must instead conduct multiple successive operations each with limited operational objects that are far short of victory, but that in aggregate can achieve strategic objectives.[86] Such operations do not necessarily have to be conducted in the same frontline area, and the long-term significance of the incursion will likely depend on Ukraine's ability to further exploit the operational and strategic level pressures complicating Russian military operations in Ukraine.

The Russians may be able to restore maneuver to the battlefield by strengthening their own military, especially if Western support for Ukraine is curtailed. Putin could significantly improve the Russian military's warfighting capabilities in several ways. Putin's unwillingness to declare another partial reserve call up has created a wider manpower hunger in the Russian military and border service, and Putin alone maintains

the ability to remedy this issue. Putin could also decide to mobilize the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) to generate additional materiel for the Russian war effort, although he will face materiel and human challenges in doing so rapidly. Manpower and armored vehicle constraints are likely slowing the Russian military command's intended timeline for Russia's military campaign in Ukraine. A better manned and provisioned Russian military in Ukraine would represent a significant threat to Ukraine at present and to the United States and Europe if Russia succeeded in subjugating Ukraine in the future.

Russia, Ukraine, and the West all have the ability to shift the battlefield realities in Ukraine – and the cessation of Western aid to Ukraine would quickly shift these realities in Putin's favor. Ukraine must continue its force restructuring and regeneration efforts and address critical morale issues among frontline forces if Ukrainian forces are to continue defending against Russian aggression.[87] Ukrainian commanders must prioritize training and cohesion among fresh infantry forces and continue to integrate asymmetric capabilities, such as drone reconnaissance and strike capabilities, with ground operations in ways that temporarily confound frontline Russian forces and complicate Russian operations in Ukraine.[88] And the West must provide armored vehicles and equipment for Ukrainian brigades that have already been staffed and for brigades on the frontline.[89]

Putin continues to indicate that he is unwilling to abandon his claims to any Ukrainian territory or compromise on any of his demands of Ukraine (including the toppling of the legitimate Ukrainian government, installation of a pro-Russian puppet government, and voluntary crippling of the Ukrainian military) or the West (the retreat of NATO from Eastern Europe).[90] Only Ukrainian operations to stop Russian offensives coupled with at least limited counteroffensive operations that force Russian troops to retreat from significant battlefield positions will compel Putin to rethink his assessment that Russia can accomplish its objectives in Ukraine through military means and to consider making the concessions needed for any peace acceptable to the United States, Europe, and Ukraine. The United States, Europe, and the wider West must continue to support Ukraine militarily and politically and impose significant costs on Russia to bring Putin to the negotiating table. Only at such a moment can the West hope to achieve a sustainable peace agreement that will preserve Ukraine's sovereignty and Europe's long-term security.

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