Breaking the Black Sea Blockade: How NATO Can Stop Russia’s Assault on the World’s Food Supply?

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion.................................................................

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A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/2120-virtual-event-regaining-decision-advantage-overhauling-jadc2-to-bolster-us-deterrence62022

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Mike Doran:
Hi, good afternoon. I'm Mike Doran of the Hudson Institute, and I'm joined today by three of my
distinguished colleagues, Bryan Clark, Bill Schneider, and Peter Rough, all of whom were also senior
fellows at the Hudson Institute. We're here today to talk about breaking the blockade on Ukraine,
breaking the naval blockade. I think to get us started, I'd like to turn to Bill Schneider and ask him just to
describe the scale of the problem that we face right now. Welcome Bill. Can you help us out?

Bill Schneider:
Thanks, Mike. Yeah, this is a classic sort of Malthusian, medieval kind of dimension of this campaign.
There are roughly 49 million people, according to the most recent estimates, that literally face
starvation as a consequence of their inability to access the grain that is normally shipped from Ukraine
in the Middle East and Africa. The Russians seek to leverage their ability to blockade the ports on the
Black Sea coast to compel the EU and the U.S. and its allies to abandon the sanctions that they've
imposed on the Russian economy. Despite the non-favorable response from Russia's perspective, they
are helping themselves to the Ukrainian grain. They have brought in supply ships through the Sea of
Azov from the internal canal network in Russia, and they have moved the grain to favored Russian allies
such as Syria. So it's a combination of crass theft and sort of Malthusian effort to extract a settlement
from the U.S. and its allies.

The Russians have a formidable capability in their Black Sea fleet, even though the Montreux Convention
prevents them from augmenting that fleet very much, their 30th surface ship division has six frigates
and a corvette. Their fourth independent submarine brigade has now five improved kilo class
submarines. Their 41st missile boat brigade has seven corvettes in it, and they have several smaller craft
that are equipped with anti-ship missiles that would collectively give them a formidable ability to
suppress any merchant ships that attempt to escape from the ports. Hence, the blockade is powerfully
enforced by the Black Sea fleet. I'll stop there.

Mike Doran:
Oh, thanks. Thanks very much, Bill. Bryan, could I now turn to you? Bryan you're, of course, the leading
defense analyst at the Hudson Institute and one of the leading defense analysts in the country. Could
you give us a better understanding of the military challenge that the United States and its allies face in
trying to break this blockade?

Bryan Clark:
Yeah. Mike, thanks, and thanks for moderating today's discussion. The distance from Odessa to the
Bosphorus is about 300 miles. So it's a long distance. The U.S. and NATO allies have given Ukraine some
land-based missiles, like harpoon missiles that might help them to protect their ships out to some
distance away from Odessa. But those missiles only have a range of about 60 to 80 miles depending on
how you use them, which doesn't get you the whole way. So they've got a couple 100 miles of water
where there's no way for the Ukrainians to protect their shipping. The Russians have shown no
compunction against shooting Ukrainian ships. They've already shot and sunk a couple of Ukrainian
ships as it is, so that the Black Sea fleet, even though it's composed mostly of smaller ships and some
smaller submarines, it has dominance in the region. So they are the largest force in the Black Sea.
So to try to solve this problem, you really got to give Ukraine either a longer range weapon from shore,
like the naval strike missile, which has maybe a 200-mile range or give it the ability to do things from the
air, which is really the big solution is you've got to give Ukraine the ability to use the air to be able to go after the Russian surface fleet in particular. So aircraft like the MQ-9, which is the Reaper aircraft, which the U.S. Has a lot of, could be provided Ukraine to do the targeting for their land-based missiles, and then beyond the range of those missiles could be used to attack some of these ships even with smaller weapons, like hellfire missiles or guided bombs, which are sufficient to neutralize some of these smaller Russian ships. So you don't need to have a sophisticated capability to take out some of these Russian ships. It's just that they need the reach in order to do it.

The bigger problem is the submarine fleet. Kilo class submarines, I've been on a kilo class submarine, they're pretty sturdy and reliable and not too sophisticated, but they're very quiet and they can stay at sea for weeks at a time, and there's no real ASW threat out there. So unless there's an anti-submarine warfare threat out there, they're going to feel free to use the submarines to threaten shipping as well. So that comes in, and there are options to use MQ-9s that might be able to deploy sonobuoys and threaten those ships, or the NATO allies in the region have MQ-9s and P8s operating out of Romania that could help come in. P8 maritime patrol aircraft have sonars, have radars, have torpedoes. They could use those directly to go against these submarines.

I'd say the last thing is the option has been thrown out there to maybe escort Ukrainian ships out to the Bosphorus. That option has a lot of problems associated with it. For one, it's going to put NATO ships in direct conflict with Russian ships. The one thing that President Biden has said he wanted to avoid would be caused by that action because guaranteed the Russians will contest the ability of Ukrainian ships to leave. So trying to escort them out, it's sure to cause confrontation and probably combat at sea, which is going to cause casualties on both sides. So better off to use the air, perhaps, and be able to do this in a little more targeted way that maybe pushes Russia back without actually resulting in the kind of confrontations that naval battle is likely to introduce. I'll stop there.

Mike Doran:
No, thanks Bryan. Before I move on to Peter, let me just ask you one more military question. I've read a lot of articles that talk about mining of the seas. How do you counter that problem?

Bryan Clark:
The mining that's in place right now has actually been put in place by the Ukrainians in an effort to protect their harbors from Russian amphibious assaults. So part of the lifting of the blockade and from Russia's perspective is removing those mines, and Russia would, of course, prefer that because then that gives them the opportunity to threaten Ukraine's coast. From Ukraine's perspective, they want to keep those mines in place until they're sure that their ships can actually leave port and make it all the way to the Bosphorus. So that's a point of contention right now, but in reality, the mine threat is one that was introduced deliberately by Ukraine to protect themselves.

Mike Doran:
Great. Thank you. Peter, let's turn to you now. You've just written an article in Foreign Policy about how the Germans, after their much wanted shift toward a more aggressive policy toward Russia, are kind of reverting to their old policy of being more deferential to Vladimir Putin. Could you talk to us both about the German attitude toward these questions, and even perhaps a little bit wider about the high politics
in general. What are the other European powers saying, and how are you reading Washington's policy on these questions?

**Peter Rough:**

Thanks, Mike, and thanks to all three of you for having me on the panel today. I would maybe start just by saying that in part because of the Germans, there really is no Black Sea strategy within NATO. This is a bit of a historical detour, but as a historian, you might appreciate this, Mike. Dating back to the Cold War, NATO has always prioritized the North. If you read through the Cold War literature, it's filled with terms like to fold the gap, the contested city of Berlin, even the high North, when it comes to nuclear weapons strategy and exchanges. Really, the core of NATO's defense has been about protecting, for example, the industrial heartland of Europe in the Rhine River Valley. So while NATO's been focused on the North, I think it has underappreciated Russia's interest in the South.

If you look at the South, a lot of Russia's modern-day historical memories connected with the Battle of Stalingrad on the Volga River is in the South. Putin himself, of course, was famously... The Georgian Khrushchev, I think was raised in the Ukrainian minds and in the Ukrainian communist party system, I think he married a Ukrainian and, of course, Putin more recently made no bones about his attitude about Ukraine in that article he published last July on the historical unity of the two peoples.

So interestingly enough, I think because of this Franco-German dominance, and that really was considered the core security interest the United States had in Europe defending the North, now this wonky gap as Belarus has been absorbed by Russia as part of its security sphere in response to the 2014 annexation of Crimea and Russia's meddling in the Donbas and the beginning of its operations there, an attack in the south, NATO's response was to start a deterrence mission in the north and the Baltic states, which makes sense. I supported that mission because the Baltic states are new responsibilities as newer member states, and they're obviously quite vulnerable, but I think it's telling that essentially the Western European core has been tepid about supporting any sort of pushback or maritime mission in the Baltic Sea so long as they were trying to develop a European security architecture with Russia, and really the hard balance of power deterrence questions that would traditionally dominate those sorts of considerations were absent and thinking as long as Russian divisions, despite the remilitarization of Kaliningrad, were rather far away in facing the Baltics and not the German states. So that's one factor.

The second I would add, and you know more about this than I, but the littoral states of which three are NATO members, Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria, as well as really the other bordering states, Moldova, Georgia have all felt the brunt of Russian power over the past decade or two. So while from the Franco-German attitude, Russia is a problem rather far away and therefore they can afford to reach out to the Russians and try to build a security architecture. I think president Macron put it famously, "From Lisbon to Vladivostok."

The Turkish attitude is that they have to hedge or accommodate because they're bearing down against Russian pressure in Syria, in Armenia, and now in the Northern Black Sea region. So they too have, in alignment with the Germans, been skeptical of a NATO maritime mission, of course in part because they consider it something of a Turkish lake, but also because they're dealing with the realities of Russian power. I think that high politics alignment of German Turkish attitudes in particular has led to NATO pulling back a bit in their Black Sea posture.
In 2010, a strategic concept was decided at NATO. It called for, I think, enhanced political consultations with Russia is the terminology that was used. It wanted to collaborate with the Russians on missile defense, neither the Baltics nor the Black Sea are mentioned in that strategic document. Of course, it'll be updated this month, June 29th, the Madrid Summit is taking place and the strategic concept is being finalized in anticipation of that. But I think it just shows how the world has changed and the attitudes of back then may no longer hold.

Just to give you one example of how this sort of German Turkish alignment, which I think is supported in large part by Washington, expresses itself in the Black Sea. While we were watching all of those Russian ships transit the Bosphorus into the war zone before February 24th, the Moskva, remember famously being one of them, photographed from the banks of the Bosphorus in Istanbul. As that was taking place, the last major NATO ally ship left in January, a friendship from the Black Sea, the last U.S. major ship, I think it was Nale Burke class missile guided destroyer left in December.

The third major NATO naval power, the Brits, hadn't been there since the summer when I think it was HMS Defender, which was accompanying Queen Elizabeth on her voyage east of Suez as to the Indo-Pacific made a detour to the Black Sea. That was sort of a famous incident because Defender approached Crimea within international waters and the Russians really contested it with fighter jets and with live fire exercise nearby. A BBC reporter on board captured a lot of that, so it made for international news. But it really shows, I think, in 2014 we had 200 days of presence, the U.S. Navy did in the Black Sea by 2016, that was down to 60 days. And last year in part because of the saber rattling of the Russians that had reached 170, 180 days, but it's nowhere near the Russian presence, as Bill just laid out, which is dozens of ships while NATO really hasn't been there.

So I think the attitude in Europe, in part reinforced by the United States, has been to be very Northern Europe-focused in its defense posture of Russia and to neglect the Black Sea, quite frankly, to the dismay of the Romanians and after 2008, the Georgians and the Turks who were seeing all around them sort of a rise Russian power.

Mike Doran:
Thanks, Peter. Bill, turning back to you. I have two major reactions to what we just heard from Peter. One, I think it's very obvious that we need sooner rather than later to come up with a Black Sea strategy. Obviously, the Russians are exploiting a weakness there. But my second reaction is that Vladimir Putin, although when this war started there were so many setbacks to the Russians that I think some of us thought this was going to end a lot sooner than it has, and it turns out that as far as the long-term is concerned, Vladimir Putin had more cards to play than certainly than I realized when this began. Is that your reaction and what kind of ideas do you have about how we might respond?

Bill Schneider:
They're very pertinent questions. I think it's probably constructive to embed our discussion of a Black Sea strategy in the larger setting of Putin's ambitions, as reflected in the Russkiy Mir, the Russian world, which encompasses a lot of the pre-World War I czarist territory in Poland, for example, and Putin has used the term existential associated with the need to acquire Ukraine, not as a sort of colonial fief, but as a territory that would be incorporated into Russia as part of his Russian world of vision. When you look at it in that context, this is likely to be a protracted conflict and he does have more cards to play.
The ability to call up prior service reservists is an option that would vastly increase the manpower, which has been one of the critical limitations on their assault on Ukraine.

But I think it's also constructive to, as Bryan was starting to lay out, some of the things that don't work. Bryan described the difficulties of trying to set up naval escorts to bring the ships safely through the Black Sea. I know it's built on the reef flagging exercise, which was done in the '90s in the Gulf, but that is not likely to work. There's a more recent suggestion that's even less likely to work, which was the administration's proposal to build grain silos on the Ukrainian-Polish border and move the grain out by rail to Baltic ports in Poland. The difficulties of a rail movement because of the different rail gauges has been estimated by the EU to mean that only about 20% of the grain that Ukraine has available would actually be able to be exported. So that's not going to work either.

So by a process of subtraction, I think the kinetic solution is probably the only way in which we can enable the grain to be exported, where we would be able to hold Russia's surface ships at risk, and then perhaps with the strength of a UN resolution or some other international organization to have humanitarian export of the grain, it could justify then more involvement by the U.S. and the UK and other countries in assuring that the threat posed by the kilo class submarines are not used to prevent the export of the grain. So I think there are some difficult but not impossible diplomatic approaches that could enable this, backed by the kinetic authority of an airborne capability to detect, track, and locate the Russian surface ships and, if necessary, sink them.

Mike Doran:
Bryan, I was really struck in your opening remarks by the elegance of your solution because clearly there are red lines that the United States and its NATO allies have about use of their own forces or imperiling their own forces, avoiding the risk of any kind of conflict with Russia. As Bill just mentioned, you really have to answer the Russians in a military fashion. So your solution is to provide the Ukrainians with the weapon systems that would allow them to protect their own shipping. Can you just talk to us? What you said was so logical and so elegant, and yet we’re not doing it. Can you describe a little bit what you perceive to be the thinking in Washington about this option and why it hasn’t been exercised?

Bryan Clark:
Yeah. There are a couple of roadblocks that people throw up. One is these unmanned systems, like the Gray Eagle, the MQ-1, which we are promised to deliver to Ukraine. And then the MQ-9 Reaper are relatively sophisticated to operate. To train somebody to fly those, because they're remotely piloted vehicles, is not trivial. The issue would be that it could be operated by a contractor and those models are used by countries around the world where the government of Ukraine buys or is given the vehicle, and then contractors from somewhere, whether it's the supplier, like General Atomics or somebody, actually operates the aircraft under the guidance and direction of a uniformed officer. That model is used elsewhere. So that model could be used here to circumvent or to shortcut that training challenge that might come up.

The other issue is to what degree these could be used offensively, right? Would they be something that would constitute a threat to Russia that would make now Russia upset that the U.S. is now giving Ukraine and offensive capability? I guess I would argue that we've already given them plenty of capabilities that could threaten Russia. We've given them GMLRS, guided multiple launch rocket systems
that can reach into Russia artillery; they can reach into Russia. It's a distinction without a difference, really when it comes to giving them a UAV like the Gray Eagle and arming it to be able to conduct counter maritime operations. We're not talking about giving them the crown jewels of U.S. anti-ship missiles. We're talking about giving them probably short-range weapons, gravity bombs that would be useful in damaging and threatening a ship so it gives the Russians enough to think about that they don't want to maybe risk one of their ships having another Moskva-like incident where one weapon hits it or two weapons hit it and it's on fire and sinks. So I think they want to avoid those kinds of confrontations if they can.

So presenting the Ukrainians with that kind of threat might be enough to back the Russians off and kind of brush them back and allow those shipments to come through. Then if something more is needed, well, then we could ramp that up by giving the Ukrainians different weapons to go with the aircraft or that maybe it's the time when NATO needs to get involved for the purpose of preventing this global food crisis.

But it kind of comes down to, going back to first principles, I think Peter made a great point that really NATO doesn't have a strategy for the Black Sea and the Russians have taken advantage of that over the years. They've really concentrated their fleet efforts in the North Sea fleet, the Black Sea fleet, and then they've taken some forces out of the East Sea fleet. So they've really doubled down on the idea of littoral combat, so short-range, inland waters. Russia sees that as their strength. And they've been building a fleet around that set of ideas. Actually they've been retiring and not replacing ships like the Moskva, the larger cruisers that constitute their blue water Cold War capability. So I think this is an example of Russia's strategy in action. I think we now need to kind of meet them where they are and start pushing back on this littoral threat that they're trying to constitute.

Mike Doran:
Bryan, if I could just stay with you for a moment. I think I understood you clearly, but just for our viewers, I want to make sure that I got your thinking in full. With regard to giving them drones that have to be... I guess we say unmanned aerial systems?

Bryan Clark:
Right.

Mike Doran:
Giving them unmanned aerial systems that have to be operated by contractors. That's a red line to the White House because that means that there are going to be Americans, even if they're not American servicemen, this is a question I'm asking, that there are going to be Americans who are going to have to be on the ground, working for the Ukrainian military, operating those systems, and that would be seen by Russia as an escalation by NATO. Is that the thinking?

Bryan Clark:
I think that's one of the concerns as to why they haven't moved forward with this GOCO model or government-owned, contractor-operated model. It's not really valid, really, because what it comes down to is there's plenty of Americans already in Ukraine, obviously doing various jobs on behalf of the Ukrainian government. So this wouldn't really be a big stretch to say that you've got Americans that are
working for a company that the Ukrainians have hired to come and help them with this. Then there's already contractors on the ground helping with training in other dimensions of the war as well. So it's, again, a distinction without really a difference. The White House needs to be probably willing to push back on Russia trying to characterize it as some massive escalation. They've got to be willing to stand up for the principle of helping Ukraine defend itself and restore these grain flows.

**Mike Doran:**
Bill. I see... Do you want to get in here?

**Bill Schneider:**
Yeah. Yes. Just a couple of additional points. The U.S. personnel do not need to be in Ukraine to operate these. These are operated through satellite communication from sites in the U.S. So the Ukrainian officers who make the decision of launching a missile or releasing a munition would be in charge. So there would be no engagement by the U.S. But I think it gets to an important point that we should begin to be drawing from this experience is that we need to better understand the coupling between kinetic threats and deterrents. The dependence that the U.S. government invested in the ability of the threat of economic and trade sanctions to deter the invasion spectacularly failed. The kinetic threat to the Russian Black Sea fleet can be part of a broader efforts to deter the Russian aspiration to block the export of this grain, which clearly is serving a humanitarian end. So I think it may be very constructive to begin to integrate these proposals into how we would use the kinetic threat to deter threats to the export of the Ukraine grain.

**Mike Doran:**
Thanks. Peter, help me understand the thinking in Washington and in NATO capitals. I listened to Bryan Clark tell me that they’re making a distinction without a difference with regard to the provision of this weaponry. I’ve watched as this conflict has unfolded, the failure of our deterrents, as Bill just mentioned. But I’ve also noticed how the United States keeps shifting the goalpost or keeps shifting the criteria on what is acceptable with regard to arming the Ukrainians.

So we learn on Monday that we can’t provide intelligence support because that would be an unwarranted escalation, and the lawyers refused to let us do it. Then on Tuesday, we learned that, okay, we decided that that’s no longer a factor, and we’re going to provide that intelligence support. We were not going to provide the unmanned aerial systems. Now we’ve made a pledge to provide them. So the criteria keeps shifting and I can’t figure out what the dynamic is inside NATO and inside the White House. What’s the thinking? Is there any kind of grand strategic concept here about reaching an agreement with Putin? Or are we really just being entirely reactive as events are unfolding?

**Peter Rough:**
Well, let me first just react to your last question and set of comments. I think here we have to expand the scope of our imagination because to the extent that we talk about UAVs on the one hand, and on the second, talk about the rising commodity prices, food shortages, energy spikes, those two phenomenon combined are directly correlated to Europe’s desire to find an off ramp and to search for what is broadly already being discussed, a Minsk 3.0. I think one of the fears about the European delegation that is in Kyiv now, the French, German, Romanian, Italian delegation is that basically they will put pressure on Zelensky at some point to come to political terms.
We've been talking for some time about a potential operational pause as both militaries exhaust themselves. That could be in the offing in the next few months, at which point, then Europe will see an even greater opportunity to codify whatever operational pause there is into a semi-permanent ceasefire. I'm sure military conflict will resume at some point, but nonetheless, I think they would see that as an opportunity. So, while we talk about breaking the blockade through kinetic means, I think the Europeans see that, and they say, "Well, we can break it through diplomatic means." The way I think they try to ally the question of being strong allies is-

Mike Doran:
Sorry, sorry, Peter. I'm sorry to interrupt. Let me just clarify something that you just said. You said while we talk about breaking the blockade-

Peter Rough:
This panel.

Mike Doran:
-that means this... Yeah. It's just this panel.

Peter Rough:
Just this panel, right.

Mike Doran:
It's not, we, the Americans. They're not –

Peter Rough:
No, no. I just meant while we're sitting here discussing this –

Mike Doran:
But the White-

Peter Rough:
... the Europeans see that, and they think we have to find a diplomatic off ramp because that, for us, is frightening and scary and a bridge too far.

Mike Doran:
But is the White House's thinking, is the President Biden's thinking in keeping with the Europeans or does he have a different view?

Peter Rough:
I think he has. Well, so my view on... Let me just finish my previous thought about how I think the European sidestep this. They're more than willing to support multinational battle groups, which have been expanded to Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia. They're happy to participate in things like Defender of '21, which came ashore in the Balkans. It's kind of the strategic depth for Romania and Bulgaria, and infrastructure there is rather weak so there's a lot of work that needs to be done in
securing up that military flank. But that's one question. Actually supporting something like we're discussing, I think Europe is in a different place.

Now as for the administration, they clearly as much as they feted themselves for reading the war correctly, that there was going to be an invasion, were briefing Capitol Hill for days that it would be over in 72 hours or so. So subsequently, I mean the famous quote Zelensky, "We're prepared to give you a ride," and he said, "I don't need a ride. I need ammunition," I think kind of substantiates that or is evidence for that. With the Ukrainians putting up such a tenacious defense, it would now be hugely embarrassing for the White House if Ukraine were to collapse altogether. So they're prepared to do enough to keep Ukraine afloat, but if you look at the pace and nature and rhythm of the weapons flows to the Ukrainians, it's almost like they have to suffer a military setback or take some serious defeat in the field before a new class of weapons is sent to the Ukrainians. So Zelensky goes public and says, "We're losing 600 to a 1,000 killed every day, 5 to 600 wounded on top of that." Those numbers have now only increased according to the Ukrainian sources.

Then we've unleashed the multiple lane, the rocket systems that Bryan mentioned earlier with certain conditions, of course, attached to those, to the ranges of those rocket systems. But it sort of shows, I think, that there are political calculations behind the military support. We've sort of handcuffed what we're prepared to give.

So I think the political considerations for the White House are number one, we don't want Kyiv to collapse because it would be a disaster. Secondly, we're still wedded to foreign policy for the middle class. So anything that would make this go away on commodity prices and other issues would be great, which is why I think we wink and nod when we put the Europeans forward to push for some sort of Minsk 3.0. And then third, I do think there's some concerns with the president in particular about escalation and not involving the U.S. in a war with NATO, which I think is a misreading of the situation given that General Milley just said the other day that Russia's lost 25 to 30% of its combat effectiveness. It's struggling hugely to take the rest of the Donbas. And even if it grinds out a victory, I don't think it's in a mood for a broader war with NATO. So we can actually be more forward leading than we've been. But I think those are basically the considerations that are driving the United States.

Real quick, in Europe, I think, there is a division. The Eastern Europeans, the polls in particular want victory. They want to ask what the Ukrainians want and double those goods that are flowing into the Ukrainians because they see that as essential for their defense. The Germans are somewhat ambivalent and have sheltered behind Macron who sees themself, again, launching a grand initiative to be the statesman of Europe and because Ukrainian security is never really, or territorial integrity even been a priority for him. He's talked about ensuring that there's an offer in so Putin isn't humiliated. There may be some territorial concessions that are necessary and so forth.

The Russians see that, and they think they're winning. Quite frankly, when we in the West sometimes look at, like the Battle for Kyiv is a big moment that caught our attention, now I think that attention's flagging a little bit. The Russians say wars aren't won or lost at one kind of decisive point. They're matters of attrition. They're matters of exhaustion. They're matters of political wills. And I think in that campaign, they read the Italian domestic press; they read some forces in Germany who are talking about the importance of giving Putin an off ramp, and they think they're in decent shape.
Mike Doran:
What I’m taking away from what you just said is that if there was to be an operational pause, we could expect the White House to celebrate that, present it as a victory against Putin, and work together with the Europeans to turn that operational pause into a permanent ceasefire even if it leaves Russia in a much more advantageous position than it was vis a vis Ukraine before the conflict. Is that right?

Peter Rough:
That sure is, that the Russians need to rebuild their own stores for sure. I mean, they're firing 60,000 rounds every day. The Ukrainians 5, 6,000, because they're low in ammunition. But the Russian war effort depends on Russia. Now, there are export controls that make it difficult for them to gain access to key technologies, but it's up to the Russians. The entire Ukrainian war strategy depends on the United States and the West. So I think the real danger is that in an operational pause, Putin will try to potentially push for normalization in return for acknowledgement of his gains, and he'll try to trade potentially Odessa for sanctions relief, and there's the big trade off that would be very attractive to a lot of Europeans and Americans.

Mike Doran:
Bryan, did you want to jump in here?

Bryan Clark:
Yeah. The idea, obviously, of territory being given to Russia in exchange for lifting the blockade is not very attractive probably for Ukraine. Then also the idea of sanctions in exchange for not attacking Odessa seems like an unattractive proposition. The issue though is also that the battle at sea is arguably where Russia has been most successful. The blockade is probably their most successful gambit thus far, and it's a huge point of leverage. So if they're able to have this operational pause, turn it into a ceasefire, they alleviate the blockade, they allow access in the Black Sea. They can always turn it right back on again whenever they want. And so it gives Putin this ability to turn on and off, off and on the flow of manufactured goods and grain out of Ukraine whenever he's unhappy with the situation so that you'll force the West into this continuous concession giving to keep Putin happy, unless you demonstrate the ability to prevent that blockade from being successful.

Mike Doran:
So, Bryan, I totally agree with you, but in terms of reading the tea leaves, after I listened to Peter, I came to the conclusion that it's unlikely that the White House is going to agree with you. Is that your view?

Bryan Clark:
I agree. I think the White House is unlikely to give Ukraine really the capability to break the blockade. They'll give them enough with the Gray Eagle MQ-1s to do surveillance and targeting, but they won't give them the weapons necessary to actually threaten Russian forces at sea beyond the range of those ground-based harpoon missiles. So it leaves the Black Sea essentially still is a Russian lake at this point.

Mike Doran:
Wow. So Bill, if I read my colleagues correctly here, then I think the only logical prediction that we can make is that this war is likely to end with territorial aggrandizement by Russia and Western acquiescence and a continued Russian threat to the shipping of Ukraine, and therefore much more
likelihood that A, Ukraine will become, if not a failed state, a state that is really the dependent on the Russians; and B, our allies in the region, particularly I'm thinking of Turkey, are going to be after this more inclined to hedge in the direction of the Russians than rather against them.

At the beginning of this conflict, we were talking about the possibility that this war would force Turkey to end all hedging behavior and line up solidly with the United States against the Russians. But that doesn't look like to me like that's what's in the cards right now. Do you agree with that analysis? And do you have alternative suggestions?

Bill Schneider:
Yes, I do. I was disappointed to see in Secretary Blinken's announcement yesterday of the additional $1 billion worth of arms that would be shipped including anti-ship missiles, that he coupled it to facilitating Ukraine's ability to negotiate a settlement. That's the first time the U.S. Has coupled or de facto conditioned arms transfers on Ukraine using this to come up with some sort of a settlement, a ceasefire or whatever, which of course is aligned with Russian strategy. They don't have the power to take over the entire territory as was the case with Georgia and as was the case with Ukraine after they took Crimea and tried to take a bigger bite out of Eastern Ukraine. They will re-arm, refit, and come back again in some reasonable period because we know that Putin's aspirations go far beyond Ukraine. They declared the Russian pseudo-state of Transnistria independent, which gives them an opportunity to put their more forces on the Moldova border, which is another state they seek to exploit.

So I do think that we should revisit, and the administration should revisit the opportunity for putting the airborne capability in place. As we discussed, it doesn't require any U.S. presence in Ukraine. There have been 42 air bases that have been identified in Ukraine where these aircraft could be operated. The special operations command has 16 MQ-9A's that it wants to change out, and those would be very well suited to this mission and I think could materially contribute to a deterrence of a Russian attack on efforts to export the grain, which is the problem we're trying to solve.

Mike Doran:
Peter, do you have any final thoughts that you'd like to offer? We're coming up to the end of our time here.

Peter Rough:
Well, if...

Mike Doran:
Any-

Peter Rough:
Yeah, sure. If you're-

Mike Doran:
Any interventions you have here or any summations?
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**Peter Rough:**
Just make this, maybe this point. I mean, if that analysis is correct, that territorial aggrandizement ends up being the trajectory of the war that Putin is able to push, and now as much as everyone says he doesn’t have the bandwidth to go for Odessa, there are a lot of shelling of Mykolaiv taking place out of Kherson and maybe after refit and rebuild, he doesn’t give up his goal of grabbing the rest of the Black Sea coastline. But irrespective, one for this famous Snake Island, for example, that was in the news in the early stages of the war. That was just recently, I think, in 2009, ’10 or ’11 subject to an international court of justice case between the Romanians and the Ukrainians over the continental shelf. These are almost Romanian territorial waters.

And if Russia does succeed in moving this far, they will hold, basically, they’re also the Danube River basin, essentially hostage. The Danube’s the second biggest river in Europe. It flows through 9 or 10 countries, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania. This is a major waterway. Granted, it’s not open to ocean-going shipping, but it’s clearly an important artery for the continent. It just shows how if Putin does succeed in this, not only does it gain power projection capabilities, but there will be a direct friction between Article 5 frontline NATO states and a Russian presence just across the border. That is not a good outcome for NATO. It doesn’t inspire confidence in places like Romania, Poland, which after Belarus now has its border with Warsaw just a jump, hop, and skip away from what amounts to a Russian Satzwrapi. Despite the admission or presumed accession of Finland and Sweden into the Alliance, it’s not necessarily a positive outcome, to say nothing about the damage done to Ukraine itself.

**Mike Doran:**
Well, if we could, as we sum up here, can we come up with... I’d like to ask each of you what your definition of victory would be. Obviously, there's not going to be total victory over Russia. There's going to have to be a negotiated settlement at some point. So could I just ask you to give us a sense of what is the minimum from an American national security point of view, the minimum that we need in order for this war to end without the Russians being in a more advantageous position with respect to NATO than they were in before it began. And let's start with you, Bryan.

**Bryan Clark:**
Yeah. I think we want Russia to be negotiated from a position of weakness or of vulnerability when this comes to the negotiating table. So put them in a position of having to withdraw a little bit from the front lines currently, maybe losing some of the Donbas. So if Ukraine was better equipped or just the existing promises of equipment were made more fully implemented in the Ukrainian kit, get them equipped to be able to start pushing back on Russian gains, you get the Russians on the ground to start having to feel like they need to consolidate and withdraw to be able to keep what they have. But fundamentally you got to eliminate the blockade or reduce the threat of the blockade because that's Russia's main point of leverage going into the negotiations. They can always say, "We've got this way to keep the world hostage and use food warfare to improve our negotiating position."

So to me, that's what we need to do is be able to lift the blockade and put Russia on its back foot in the east so that then when negotiations start, whatever territorial concessions go to Russia are going to be reduced somewhat from what they're going to have if things just pause where they are now.
Mike Doran:
Lift the blockade and provide Ukraine with the capabilities it needs to ensure that the blockade cannot be reimposed at Russia's will.

Bryan Clark:
Correct. Right.

Mike Doran:
Bill, I assume you agree with Bryan and do you have any additional thoughts?

Bill Schneider:
Yeah, maybe embellishments rather than change in direction. But the stopping the blockade is important, not only for the conduct of the conflict, but also for global humanitarian purposes. We really need to be able to separate that issue from the conduct of the war itself. If we are successful in persuading the US government to provide unmanned aerial systems to Ukraine, that can contribute to the ground campaign as well and provide a capacity to change the direction of the campaign where the dearth of adequate military capabilities that are being provided are causing or enabling a Russia to successfully push Ukraine out of its own territory. The Russians have increased their share of Ukraine territory from 7% on February 23rd to 20% in the middle of June. So they clearly have gained. We have to change the direction of the campaign and end the blockade to be able to have a basis for some sort of ceasefire or other forms of suspension of the conflict.

Mike Doran:
Peter, I give you the last word here. Do you have anything to add to what your colleagues have said?

Peter Rough:
I'd agree with all of that. I do think Ukraine has to win back a substantial amount of territory to signal to the world that this does not pay. I think that alone matters for proliferation purposes. If the world concludes that the U.S. is being deterred by an offensive nuclear posture by Russia, it essentially self deters a conventional conflict. Secondly, that Ukraine was wrong to give up its nuclear weapons. If all of that is sort of the lesson taken away from this, I think it could be disastrous and really help trigger or maybe push over the edge at a nuclear cascade. So that I think is a big concern.

Then the second, I think this is more process than substance, but the Ukrainians should be allowed to fight so long as they want to fight and we should outfit them so long as they would like to fight. It's easy to say you're prepared to sacrifice until the last Ukrainian, but the Ukrainians are the ones volunteering to fight, and as long as they'd like to be on the defensive and take back their own territory, I think the West should be supportive in that mission and goal.

Mike Doran:
Well, thank you, gentlemen. You've really helped me to understand not just this question of the blockade, but I think I've come away from this with a much better understanding of the role that Ukraine and the Ukraine conflict plays in Western defense strategy. Thanks a lot. I really appreciate this and I hope to see you back here soon.
Bryan Clark:
Thanks, Mike.

Peter Rough:
Thanks.