

After denying & covering up proxy war in Ukraine,

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publishes "untold story of America's hidden role in Ukrainian military operations against Russia's invading armies" but calls it "partnership of intelligence, strategy, planning and technology:" "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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

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.

At the heart of the partnership were two generals — the Ukrainian, Zabrodskyi, and the American, Donahue. 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.

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.

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.

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.” 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.”

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.

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 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.

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. 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....”

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