Paige Montfort: Thank you. Good morning, good afternoon, or evening, depending on where you’re all joining us from today. Welcome to the third edition of the Center for Strategic and International Studies Ukraine Updates Press Briefing Series.

My name is Paige Montfort. I’m the media relations coordinator here at CSIS. And it is an honor to join you today along with three of our leading experts for a discussion on the state of the war in Ukraine.

Before we begin, I wanted to let everyone know that we are still continually updating our curated collection of independent, bipartisan analysis from across the Center called “Crisis: Crossroads Ukraine.” I highly recommend this resource, which you can find on CSIS.org. It has up-to-date information on our latest analyses, events, videos, podcasts, and more, and you’ll also find the transcript from this press briefing there as well in a few hours.

So today, just to give you a roadmap of where we are going, each of our three experts will start with about seven to eight minutes of opening remarks and analysis, and then we will open it up to your questions. Our moderator is going to instruct you on how to join that queue when the time comes. And as a reminder, that transcript will be available after this call. If you’ve RSVPed, it will also come directly to your inbox.

So, without further ado, I’m going to briefly introduce our experts in the order in which they’ll be speaking.

First, we will have Max Bergmann. He’s CSIS’s new Europe Program director. This is his first press briefing with us, and we are honored and excited to have him onboard. Max will provide a geopolitical overview of where the Kremlin finds itself, give a quick take on May 9th, then describe Putin’s options.

He will turn it over to Mark Cancian. He’s senior adviser in the CSIS International Security Program. And he’s going to talk about the current military situation and the impact of military aid packages in Ukraine.

And finally, Marti Flacks, our Khosravi Chair in Principled Internationalism and director of the CSIS Human Rights Initiative, is going to provide a human rights and accountability update.

So, Max, the floor is yours.

Max Bergmann: Great. Thank you, Paige. It’s great to be at CSIS and great to have my first press call. And great – thanks, everyone, for being here.

As Paige noted, I think I’ll just do sort of a quick overview on kind of how I see things playing out geopolitically for Russia. May 9th, you know, the
entire world was focused on what Putin would say at the annual May 9th parade and celebration of defeat of Germany in World War II and victory in Europe. And the answer was that there wasn’t much to actually comment on. Putin didn’t say very much. He repeated many of things that he had said before. And the signs that everyone was looking for of a potential mass mobilization of Russian society in support of the war did not happen. He did not indicate that that would occur. And I think that’s really significant and I think it’s not because that Russia feels that they’re very sort of content with the way things are going on the battlefield. Mark will talk a little bit more about that.

But the war is not, I think, going as planned and the thing that Russia could do to really make a material impact I think is to mobilize its entire society, but I think there’s a few reasons why it’s not going to do that and that’s, number one, there isn’t necessarily a guarantee that that would be successful on the battlefield, bringing in new conscripts, but I think more importantly, and secondly, is this leads to – it would run into domestic political unease and potentially real angst that could really challenge Putin at home domestically. And I think what this gets to is a broader tension that we are now seeing between Russia’s broader geopolitical ambitions and its capacity to live up to that. And one of the, you know, key priorities of the Putin regime over the last 22 years has been, I think, two major focuses, which is, one, regime stability. The preservation of the regime is critical. Obviously, a mass mobilization would potentially endanger that.

And the other priority is Russia’s geopolitical standing; that has been a preeminent priority for Putin and I think it in some ways stems from his KGB past, but that is a major focus of his and major focus of Russia. So, hence, what we’re seeing is that those are in tension, that if you mobilize your society to fight a war that they thought was just a “special military operation” for geopolitical ends, you’re potentially endangering your own domestic stability.

But I think going forward, if we sort of, you know, move kind of past Ukraine and look a little bit more broadly about how Russia will find itself, I think the major concern that I think Vladimir Putin has to see right now is that the export control sanctions haven’t really yet begun to bite and those are definitely going to impact Russia’s ability to rebuild, to recapitalize its military that is currently being chewed up in Ukraine. The economic sanctions are also depriving Russia of a lot of revenue. So if we look ahead, how does Russia rebuild its military? It’s also going to have to do a lot of reforms to its military. Every time it fires a cruise missile it needs to replace that cruise missile, it’s going to need semiconductors, it’s going to need specialized parts to rebuild tanks and make sure their tank factories keep producing, and some of those specialized tools come from Europe, come from machine parts made in Germany. And so how is Russia, now with
export controls that prevent it from being able to get this technology, get these critical items, going to be able to recapitalize its military I think is a major question. It's going to definitely try to evade sanctions the way North Korea has, but it's not – we're not talking about Russia creating sort of a bespoke missile program or nuclear setup. What we're talking about is an incredibly large defense industrial complex that is not only critical for Russia to rebuild its military but also critical for Russia's broader foreign policy.

And I think this is another question that we are looking at here at CSIS is how will Russia be able to, you know, keep its orders going to India, which is entirely dependent on the Russian defense industry? Fifty percent of Africa's imports of defense items are Russian. Will it be able to meet those? So when your foreign policy is directly tied to your defense industrial capacity, it raises a lot of questions going forward about where Russia's – what Russia's role will be in the world and whether its foreign policy relationships will weaken.

And then just sort of maybe a final comment of where I think Putin could go to kind of reestablish and maintain Russia's standing as its economy weakens, as it's potentially unable to sort of match its defense industrial capacity of the past, is – you know, it's going to turn to a lot of the familiar tools that we're seeing – that we've seen over the last eight years: the active measure campaign, the disinformation efforts, the political interference, the use of cyberattacks. But I think each one of these asymmetric tools – what we've seen is that the West has spent the last eight years very focused on this, very focused on learning and understanding how Russia operates, is right – the West, the U.S. in particular, but also Europe very focused on Russian cyber activity, very focused on Russian potential political influence. And so this is a much different environment that Russia encountered in 2014, ’15, and ’16 in which we were all sort of – both U.S. and Europe – caught off guard by Russia's influence efforts and their ability to manipulate social media, their ability to interfere in political campaigns.

So and then when it comes to the cyber domain and the potential attacks on cyber infrastructure, it's something that we have to be very concerned about. I also think that this is – there's some real challenges for Russia here. Both our focus on Russia, but then if they conduct additional cyberattacks against our critical infrastructure, they have to be concerned that we will respond, and I think it's a very different environment than last year when they – Russia-linked cyber actors attacked the Colonial Pipeline and took that down when the Biden administration was in the midst of trying to sort of establish a détente with Russia. That is not the environment now, and as Russia has bogged down in Ukraine, I don't think they're going to want sort of an escalatory cycle when it comes to sort of provoking us to get more involved in the conflict or to take direct action in the cyber domain against them.
So that leads, I think, to the nuclear dimension, and I think what we’re going to have to – what we’re going to expect to see, going forward, is that a weakened Russia militarily, a Russia that feels exposed, is going to rely on its nuclear arsenal, at least for messaging and saber-rattling purposes, because that is, I think, the clear path where it can demonstrate that it still remains a true great power and that’s one way, I think, we’re already seeing the rhetoric of the Kremlin go in that direction of really loose talk when it comes to nuclear weapons.

Maybe I’ll just conclude by saying all of this said, we should not underestimate Russia. It does not take a lot for Russia to be a great power. In fact, it’s actually very hard, given its size, its energy resources, the ingenuity of its people, for Russia to be (sic) a great power. And in fact, you know, Putin, I think, is playing what is actually a very good hand very badly right now with Russia in the world.

So I think we, you know, shouldn’t treat Russia as President Obama did in 2014 when he called Russia a regional power because they will have the ability to respond, and I think what they are counting on is that we will shift our focus elsewhere, that we won’t actually follow through on a lot of the sanctions efforts that we are doing and that those will weaken and that Russia will be able to get out from under them. And then they’ll also find new creative ways, I think, to have an impact on us.

Maybe I’ll leave it there and I’ll turn it over to Mark.

Mark F. Cancian: Great. Thanks, Max.

Let me do a couple of things. I’m going to start with a tour of the battlefield and then talk about U.S. aid and then U.S. defense industry. Looking around the battlefield up in the northeast around Kharkiv, you’re seeing Ukrainian counterattacks that may be increasing, expanding to an actual counteroffensive. The Russians have lost some ground. The city seems to be – Russian forces around the city seem to have been pushed back. I mean, that’s a good news story for the Ukrainians.

Most of the fighting, of course, is in the east. In the Donbas region, the Russians have been pushing out from the areas that they controlled previously, all those separatist areas. They’ve also been moving down from the north. Haven’t been making a lot of progress. You’ve probably heard a lot about fighting around the town of Izyum. What the Russians have been trying to do is to get behind the Ukrainians. In other words, the Ukrainians are further east holding the line against the separatist republics. The Russians have been trying to move from the north down through Izyum and then maybe up from Mariupol to cut off these Ukrainian forces. They have
not been successful so far. It’s been – you know, the Russians have taken a
couple of villages but, you know, they aren’t making a lot of progress.

It’s sort of surprising that they haven’t launched a massive offensive. I think
the expectation was that when they pulled back from Kyiv they were going
to husband all their forces and then launch them all at once in one of these
Soviet-style offensives. That didn’t happen. They’ve been feeding units in
gradually, piecemeal.

Looking around, you know, of course, we’ve got Mariupol. You know, the
Ukrainians are still holding on in the steel factory there. The Russians are
attacking but, you know, they’ve, clearly, taken the approach of using
firepower – they don’t want to use more forces – which illustrates a problem
the Russians have had from the very beginning of this conflict, which is they
just don’t have very much infantry. They’ve got lots and lots of armored
vehicles but not much dismounted infantry. That’s a problem when you’re
fighting in cities, when you want to take a steel factory, for example. But it’s
been a general problem in that their armor has been quite exposed.

You know, their military was really designed for mobilization. And then,
when they sent all these battalion task groups off, they were – they took all
of their equipment, but they didn’t have all of the personnel that they really
needed. So, you know, this has been a problem through the entire campaign,
and I’ll come back to that in a second.

In the south, we talked about Mariupol. You know, their push north out of
the Crimea stalled, you know, a couple weeks ago. On the west, around
Kherson, they’re still holding the city but they’ve been, again, pushed back.
You know, their ability to threaten Odesa, I mean, they really have no ability
anymore. They have been using their long-range missiles, but that inventory
is probably getting low. Our missile project here at CSIS estimates they fired
something over 2,000 missiles. Bellingcat estimates that that might be 70
percent of their inventory. So, you know, that part of the war may be
decreasing.

And I’ll talk a second here about the air war, which has been a surprise. You
know, the – you know, the attacks that you’ve been seeing are coming from
missiles mostly and artillery – you know, the explosions you see on the news
– very few of them from aircraft flying over dropping bombs. The Russian air
force has been really not used very much and they haven’t suffered a lot of
casualties. I mean, they’ve lost something like 35 aircraft, which, you know,
by the standard of these things is not that much. So that’s a mystery in the
West, and there are a lot of theories of what that might be – why that might
be happening.
Turning to the aid packages, let me talk about this last one, this $40 billion. There are a couple of interesting things about this package. You know, one is, of course, it goes until the end of the fiscal year. You know, the previous packages had been designed to last, you know, two weeks, maybe three weeks. Now there’s a recognition this war may go on for a long time and we are putting aid together for the long term.

That’s also allowed us to provide major weapons, you know, like the towed howitzers, the M777s, like the armored personnel carriers. Other European countries are providing those because now we’re expecting to have the time to train up Ukrainians on these new systems.

A couple of interesting things. You know, there’s a lot of money, of course, for weapons and aid. There’s money to reimburse our European allies. You know, they’ve been providing a lot of their Soviet-era equipment, giving that to Ukraine. That’s good for Ukraine because they already know how to operate these systems. The Eastern Europeans have been wanting to get rid of it and buy NATO-standard equipment. I’ve said that this is a win-win-win: the Ukrainians get equipment to replace their losses, the Eastern Europeans get to buy new NATO-standard equipment, and the U.S. defense industry gets to sell more equipment.

There were a couple of other interesting things in this new act. I mean, one is that the level of U.S. support has gone up. You know, at the beginning of the war we were providing support at about $50 million a day. A couple weeks ago that went up to a hundred million dollars a day. This package takes it up to about $170 million a day, and that excludes, you know, the humanitarian and some of the defense industry items.

Also interesting in the package, you know, there are some items in there that are really long-term defense industry kinds of support. You know, there’s $500 million for critical minerals, for example, you know. I mean, that may take years to set up, you know, the production facilities for those kinds of things.

Let me talk a little about defense industry. I’m getting a lot of questions about U.S. stockpiles and whether, you know – what effect all of this provision of aid is having on the United States and the defense industry. You know, I wrote a piece a couple of weeks ago about Javelins – You know, will the United States run out of Javelins before Russia runs out of tanks? – calculating that the United States has sent about a third of its inventory of its Javelins to Ukraine. I mean, that number has actually been confirmed later.

And as a result, I think that the U.S. military has drawn a line on Javelins and Stingers, saying that we can’t send any more because we will be endangering – we’re getting below our targets for various other operation war plans. But,
you know, we can supply other kinds of weapons. You know, for antitank, for example, we may not be able to provide Javelins. We may start running out of NLAWs, which is another antitank weapon. But we can provide another kind of weapon, which is called a TOW. It’s vehicle-mounted, but it can be mounted on a light vehicle. So it’s not that the Ukrainians are going to be out of antitank weapons. We’re just going to have to provide different kinds. We’re going to have to adapt.

You’re also seeing a lot of NATO equipment going over, as I mentioned. They have time. It’s also an ammunition problem; that is, that the Ukrainians use Soviet-standard ammunition. It’s very hard to find it on the world market when you can’t buy it from Russia or China. I think we’ve basically bought up the world market on Soviet-standard artillery ammunition. So we’re moving to NATO.

And I think that’s about it. You know, again, there’s a lot of – one final thought. There’s a lot of money in the – you know, there’s $40 million for sort of expanding U.S. production capabilities long term. You know, we’re talking years, maybe even decades there.

And one last thing. You know, there’s this Lend-Lease Act that’s just coming through – passed Congress. And I don’t know if the president has signed it yet or not. Not clear really what it does. You know, it does allow the United States to send equipment without the congressional caps. But Congress has just provided caps. And, of course, it’s based on a fiction, you know, you’re going to get this equipment back. So I’m not sure really just how much. I think it’s probably more symbolism than, you know, actual capability.

And let me stop there and then pass it on.

Marti Flacks: Thanks, Mark. I’ll jump in. This is Marti.

So I’ll just quickly cover three things. One is just what we’re seeing on the ground in terms of human rights and atrocities; and then second, just an update on where things are in terms of investigations and accountability mechanisms, and then a couple of words about what could come next and what we’re looking out for in the future.

So, you know, we continue to see what, by all evidence, appears to be war crimes committed by Russian forces in Ukraine. Since the beginning of this conflict, I’ve thought about the actions of the Russians in sort of two categories. One is the conduct of the air war and the other is the conduct of their ground forces. And we, you know, continue to see from the air attacks on civilians and on civilian infrastructure.
This weekend we saw the bombing of the school in the Donbas, in Bilohorodka, another example of a place where civilians were taking shelter from the conflict and, you know, no indication that that was a legitimate military target. So that pattern continues to repeat in the number of individual instances of those kinds of locations being targeted.

We're also seeing from the air the sort of widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and the just, you know, ongoing relentless bombing that we've seen in Mariupol over the last several weeks, couple of months now; obviously concerned about that pattern repeating itself if indeed the Russian forces do turn back to Odesa.

It was good to hear from Mark, actually, that, you know, maybe they're running too low on airpower to repeat that exercise, because I think the civilian toll from this war and the atrocities, the scale of atrocities that have been committed, is really coming from the air war. And that's not to minimize what's happening on the ground, which I'll talk about in a minute. But, you know, the level of humanitarian impact of that scale of bombing, whether that's not just killing and injuring of civilians but cutting off electricity, cutting off heating, water, all of those things, is really what's driving, you know, so much of the civilian death and civilian injury.

So that's the – but, you know, we are continuing to see those bombings and that targeting of civilian infrastructure on the ground.

On the ground, it's been challenging to understand what's happening in Russian-controlled areas. Obviously, what happened in Bucha and in the other suburbs of Kyiv became clear only when the Russians withdrew, and the Ukrainians were able to go back in and investigate what happened.

And so I think, you know, it's going to take some time for us to understand what's happening in the places in the east, where the Russians are capturing territory or attempting to capture territory. And the more this conflict remains frozen, the harder it's going to be to understand that to collect and preserve that evidence. And so we are going to have to rely as much as possible on other forms of information – whether that's satellite imagery, drone footage, social media to the extent people still have internet access – to understand what's happening on the ground in those places that Russia is or will be occupying.

We also, of course, have a different displacement situation. Those who fled early in the conflict from the western part of Ukraine were able to flee into Poland and other parts of Europe. Those in the east largely have not been able to travel that direction. We saw some early voluntary displacement into Russia, but we've seen some pretty disturbing reports of the Russians forcibly evacuating civilians from Mariupol and other parts of the east into
Russia. And as people are displaced from these new areas of hiding, we’re certainly concerned about and looking for whether that pattern repeats itself and what happens to those – to those civilians.

I’ll just say a couple of words about the investigations and the opportunities for accountability for these war crimes, starting with the Ukrainians themselves, who have taken a fairly aggressive posture in terms of both the investigation and the prosecution of these crimes. They have gone to great pains to demonstrate that their legal system and their government as a whole are functioning. Their prosecutor has talked about an order of 10,000 cases that they’ve already identified as war crimes that they would like to investigate and prosecute. They’ve started already with charges in a number of cases. They’ve got charges issued against 10 Russian soldiers for crimes in Bucha.

They’ve got three soldiers actually in custody who will face charges for a couple of different circumstances for their actions early in the conflict. And they will probably be the first to actually go to trial. And that’s symbolically going to be important, obviously, because it’s happening in the midst of a conflict. They’re not waiting for this war to end. But it’s also going to be, you know, important to watch how those trials are conducted, the capacity and the desire of the Ukrainians to sort of follow international standards and make sure that as emotional and as difficult as these trials are going to be, that they follow internationally accepted legal procedures.

They have indicated that they have at least one other suspect they’re identified but don’t have in custody and they’re considering a trial in absentia. That is something that is allowed under Ukrainian law. It’s not allowed under many other countries’ criminal laws, and it’s not permitted under international criminal law. So that’s something that’s going to be a little bit challenging in terms of sort of international acceptance of the Ukrainians’ justice mechanisms.

The other thing I think that’s really important that’s happened in the last few weeks is the launch of a joint investigation team between Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, and the International Criminal Court. This is the first time that the ICC has signed a sort of cooperation agreement with countries to do investigations together. It’s incredibly important in this case because of the desire not to have multiple investigators going back to the same crime scenes, repeating their work. It risks retraumatizing victims and survivors and witnesses if they have to be – if they have to be interviewed multiple times by multiple different investigations. And it helps streamline the eventual decisions about which court will exercise jurisdiction over which crimes.
And so it’s a really significant development. And I think it’s a symbol of the opportunity that this conflict shows to demonstrate how the international justice system should work, which is ironic because, of course – because Russians will, by and large, be the defendants. That’s going to be incredibly difficult to actually carry out – secure defendants and carry out trials. But the structure that they set up in this case where you have the cooperation of the national court system and of the government where the atrocities occurred, and the support of surrounding states where refugees have fled to, and witnesses have fled to, and have – you know, where information might be available that can help in prosecutions, and the international justice system through the ICC, is how this system is supposed to work.

The ICC was always meant to be complementary to national courts, not independent and not above them. And so we’ll be watching very closely how that joint investigative team carries out its work, and how they ultimately divide up the responsibilities for prosecution. Other things, quickly, of note. You know, the ICC prosecutor came to Washington a couple of weeks ago in his first official visit here, which by all counts seems to have gone well. We’ve certainly seen the Biden administration be forward leaning in supporting the ICC investigation. We’ve seen bipartisan support for that, including, you know, the Senate passing unanimously a resolution in support of the ICC investigation. We’ve got both official U.S. support that will go to in particular the Ukrainians, but also a lot of U.S. experts, former U.S. officials, and things like that who are supporting the Ukrainians in this effort and by extension supporting the ICC as well. And you know, we do have the sense that the U.S. will be willing, to the extent it can declassify information, for example, to share intelligence and to share expertise with the ICC and the other investigations in order to identify who’s responsible for particular actions and help to put the pieces together to prosecute.

And then just lastly, you know, things to look out for coming forward or looking forward. We’re still – you know, even though the Ukrainians have started their prosecutions and they’re going to move as quickly as possible and we’ll want to watch how those trials unfold, the ICC is probably still a few months away from issuing its first arrest warrants. It will be interesting to see whether they issue those as sealed or unsealed. They can keep them sealed so that it’s easier to arrest somebody if they decide to travel internationally and unseal them at the time of arrest. It will be interesting to see how they time that with, you know, upcoming potential travel that I’m sure they’re going to start tracking by potential Russian defendants.

There’s discussion in international legal circles about standing up an independent tribunal for the crime of aggression, which the ICC does not have jurisdiction over in this case. And so whether a parallel court could be set up to prosecute Russians for the actual invasion itself, not the conduct of the invasion, is something that is very interesting and, in a way, perhaps
some of the easiest charges to prove in terms of the nature of the – of the war itself.

And then, as I mentioned earlier, just looking out to what happens if this war does become sort of frozen in place and the Russians occupy significant parts of eastern Ukraine, having the resources and the effort to understand what’s happening to civilians on the ground in difficult circumstances is going to be really important.

So let me stop there and turn it back to over to Paige.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you, Marti. And thank you, Mark and Max. Really appreciate your helpful analysis and updates.

So now we’re going to turn it over to our audience for questions. But first, I’m going to turn to our conference host for instructions on how you all can join in the queue for your questions.

Operator: (Gives queuing instructions.)

And our first question will come from Lauras, Didier, with AFP. Please go ahead.

Q: Yes, hello, guys. Can you hear me well?

Ms. Montfort: Yes. Yes, we can, Didier.

Q: Cool. Thank you, guys, for having me.

The first – I mean, my question maybe is for Mark Cancian. We all remember what we’ve seen in March in Kyiv and the north of Ukraine. Then we all remember when Moscow said that they would reorganize everything for the Donbas. And now the massive offensive is just simply not happening. So my question is: Is the Russian army that bad? In other words, are you surprised by the problem, the need at the moment, and the fight that they are not able really to, you know, take Mariupol and advance in the Donbas and control all this area?

With this question come(s) another one, with the figure I hear that about 70 percent of Russian ground forces are dedicated to this war. Would you agree with this figure? And if yes, how much of this is still completely operational when you consider all the attrition and the equipment destroyed? Thank you.

Mr. Cancian: OK. Well, let me – let me give you a couple of answers.
The first question is about – you asked about the performance of the Russian forces. And you know, the short answer is that they’ve done surprisingly poorly. Most observers thought that they would do a lot better. The Russians went through a series of reforms after 2008. In 2008 they had invaded the country of Georgia. They won but they won ugly. They reformed the military very substantially. In 2014 they took over Crimea. The operation was done very smoothly; it was done very professionally. They fought in Syria, and although they were extremely brutal, their operations, again, seem to have been quite effective, so the expectation was that this was a pretty effective force, and we have not seen that. We have a problem, of course, with the infantry, but also just the tactical skill has been very poor. Their inability to use combined arms – it’s really, I think, surprised many people.

You asked the question about whether 70 percent of their forces had been dedicated to the war, and, you know, that’s a number that’s – a number of commentators have noted and so I think it is probably correct. That’s probably all that they could send. It’s, you know, since this is, you know, a big deal, this is a major war for them, you know, sending that amount of their force is likely – you know, likely sensible; you can argue about, you know, how they’ve organized themselves, you know, operationally or strategically, but, you know, I think if you’re fighting a war it makes sense to send, you know, as many of your troops as possible.

And finally, you asked about the – you know, the offensive in the east and the fact that, you know, we haven’t seen this massive offensive, which is true; they just dribbled in the forces as they arrived rather than making one major attack. And I think it gets back to the fundamental problem which is that the Russian military is just not very big. It’s only about 900,000, and for perspective, the United States is about 1.3 million. The United States also has about 800,000 in a highly ready reserve; the Russian reserves are really very low-readiness. This is not the Red Army of World War II that marched to victory over the bodies of its dead. You know, this is a much smaller army that has to be very careful about its casualties. And the fact that they’ve taken so many casualties I think has been a huge problem. They’re replacing some of them, you know, with reinforcements in new units but they’ve lost a lot of skilled personnel and, you know, I think you’re seeing that in their operations.

Does that answer your question?

Q: Yeah, yeah. I would – I mean, you say they’ve performed very poorly. Are you surprised by how poorly they have been? Because, you know, even – I think even some of you guys in CSIS like a few weeks ago would have said once they’ve reorganized things are going to be much, much harder for the Ukrainians. And for some reason they still resist and for some reason this is
not happening, and they’ve been even literally kicked out of Kharkiv. So, I mean, how bad is that? Are you surprised or you were expecting this?

Mr. Cancian: Well, I think most people were expecting a major offensive, you know, that they would rest and reinforce and that they would launch a large offensive. On the other hand, I think the expectation – the recognition was that the Russians just didn’t have a whole lot of forces, they had to pull out of Kyiv, so people recognize that, you know, this is not going to look like a Soviet offensive of, you know, 1943, 1944, you know, with massive amounts of troops. And I would say also, you know, when you think about the front lines in Ukraine, you know, we draw these lines on the map. You know, there are very few forces – you know, most of these front lines are really just a series of strong points, not continuously manned, you know, trench lines, so, you know, that’s why you’re seeing a lot of fluidity.

Operator: Thank you. Next we go to the line of Jeroen Zuallaert with Knack. Please go ahead.

Q: Hello. I hope everyone can understand.

Ms. Montfort: Hi, Jeroen. I think we are having a bit of trouble hearing you.

Q: Hello? Is this better? Hello?

Ms. Montfort: Yes, we can hear you. Thank you.

Q: OK. Great. So thank you so much for your comments up to now.

My question concerns the Ukrainian objectives in this war. Dmytro Kuleba, the Ukrainian foreign minister, stated today that, I mean, Ukraine doesn’t longer – their intention is no longer to just survive this as a state, but actually to try to reconquer territory that has been occupied by the Russian forces. I was wondering how the panel views these statements, how it will impact the war, and whether it is realistic to think that Ukrainian forces might be able to reconquer territory that has been occupied by the Russians.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you. And Max and Mark, if you both want to kind of speak a little bit to this one.

Mr. Bergmann: Sure. Maybe I can start and then hand it over to Mark to get into the military probabilities. I think when it comes to Ukrainian objectives, look, Ukraine wants to be – you know, have their territorial integrity. And that’s not simply that they’re just trying to gain territory for – regain territory for territory’s sake. There’s a humanitarian component, as there’s a lot of concern about what life is like behind Russian lines, and the treatment of the Russian military of the Ukrainian population. But then there’s also a larger
geopolitical concern that I think has to be occupying President Zelensky's thinking, which is that if Ukraine is not – doesn’t have control of its territory, then it’s incredibly hard to see it joining NATO or the European Union. And I think joining the EU is, in particular, a major goal.

And this is sort of why I think the notion that Russian invaded – if we sort of go back to what the debate was in December and January and February – that Russia was being sort of provoked by the potential for Ukraine NATO expansion. Look, there’s no possible way that NATO would be able to expand to Ukraine when it doesn’t control its whole territory and it was at war with Russia. And so I think what you’re going to see is that same tension that existed between 2014 and the start of this war, which was that Russia, by controlling part of Ukrainian territory, but Ukraine then claiming its territory – rightfully so – Russia has a de facto veto over Ukraine’s future membership in any big Western club, whether that’s NATO or the EU.

And so I think for Ukraine, it is literally trying to regain as much territory as possible as it eyes a potential European future. Now, I don’t want to sort of prejudge how this would play out in any sort of negotiation, but I do think that when you look ahead, that Ukraine will need in – if Zelensky is going to make territorial concessions, that if it’s impossible for Ukraine to actually fully take all the territory back – and I think that’s particularly true of Crimea – then he’s going to need some big carrot to sell to the Ukrainian public about why they should essentially give up on the Ukrainian territory that’s stranded on the other side.

So that’s going to be an incredibly – and I think, you know, EU/NATO membership is potentially the thing that he’s going to go to. But I think what they want to do is to be able to get as much territory back under Ukrainian control as possible, to make it so that their future possibilities going forward are wide open. And so that right now, they may potentially see an advantage on the battlefield, and potentially to press for some gains. And I’ll turn it over to Mark there.

Mr. Cancian: Yeah, thanks, Max. Well, you’re seeing some local counterattacks by the Ukrainians, and you have for a couple weeks. I know right now they are focused to the northeast around Kyiv. I mentioned that they’re also some in the southwest, east or west or Kherson, around Mykolaiv. And the Russians have been making a little progress there also. I don’t think they have enough combat power to push the Russians out of all of their occupied terrain – first the territory that they’ve occupied in this invasion and, of course, the territory that they took over in 2014.

You know, long term U.S. and NATO are providing weapons – you know, heavier weapons that would allow the Ukrainian army, once they are able to assimilate those, to maybe have the combat power that they would need to
push the Russians out, or at least out of substantial parts of territory. One of the things I might have mentioned earlier is it’s going to take a long time for all of that equipment to be assimilated. I think it’s going to take weeks or months. And we could talk about that. I think they’re going to need to actually use some operational contractors from the West in Ukraine to keep this equipment operating.

There were two wild cards, though, and when we think about the – you know, the future of the conflict, you know, one is about the Ukrainians. You know, we really know very little about the state of the Ukrainian armed forces. You know, all these journalists who are reporting on Ukraine have been doing it from Lviv or maybe Kyiv. You know, you don’t have anybody on the front line. There were no embedded reporters.

So we really don’t know. I mean, as far as we can tell, the Ukrainian armed forces continue to be quite effective. Their casualties seem to have been much lower than the Russians and the morale is high. But, you know, we really don’t have a lot of independent assessment there.

The other wild card is the Russians. You know, their army seems quite fragile. Lots of reports about low morale. They’ve taken a lot of casualties. It’s not, you know, beyond the possibility that the army could collapse and, you know, retreat precipitously. I don’t know if that’s likely but it’s, certainly, not impossible and, you know, historically, it has happened in the past.

Operator: Thank you.

If there are any additional questions in the queue, please press one and zero at this time. OK. And our next question will come from Doris Simon with German Public Radio. Please go ahead.

Q: Hi. Thank you for doing this.

I have a question concerning the lend-lease program. The historic lend-lease program was, obviously, intended also to go around the neutrality conditions. This year, as you mentioned, Congress has been constantly giving more than the president asked for, and I was wondering if this lend-lease Ukraine democracy program now is really much more than just, you know, trying to, yeah, make a link to that historic program, you know, boost morale in the U.S. and, yeah, not really needed, actually.

Mr. Cancian: OK. Let me jump in there since I raised this. And I think your analysis is correct, that is, this – it doesn’t seem to be required, given that Congress has been quite bipartisan and is supportive of Ukrainian aid and quite rapid in providing that aid. The president requests aid and Congress has – passes it within, you know, a week or two.
I think you’re right. I mean, there’s a lot of symbolism to this lend-lease. I mean, it sounds nice. As I mentioned, you know, it’s built on this fiction that the equipment will come back at the end of the conflict. I mean, that wasn’t true in the Second World War. It just made everyone feel better. I’d be surprised if it was, really, used very extensively.

The other thing to keep in mind is that all of the equipment that the United States has provided to Ukraine has been backfilled. There’s money there to buy replacements. Now, it’s going to take a long time. We are talking probably years before some of these inventories are fully replenished. Javelins probably take four or five years. But the money is there and the Pentagon knows that it will be made whole.

If there were an effort to move a lot of equipment without the money to backfill you’d start hearing complaints from the Pentagon – you know, having them point out that we were increasing risks to our forces and, you know, that it was not appropriate to send equipment without it being replaced, which is what lend-lease would do.

So I don’t think it’s really needed and I think if it were used extensively it would cause some pushback from the Pentagon.

Mr. Bergmann: Yeah, and if I could just add to Mark’s comments.

I think, you know, one of the things that the United States did during the Cold War with the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act is, basically, institutionalized and created an entire sort of security assistance system and bureaucracy. So while lend-lease was, you know, quite innovative at the time, what happened during the Cold War is that we sort of figured out how to institutionalize this and do security assistance at scale.

I think what’s been really impressive in this crisis is the expansion of something called presidential drawdown authority, which normally is limited to a hundred million (dollars) a year, and the thing there is that what that means is you can pull equipment from U.S. military stocks and just send it to the battlefield. So, essentially, that’s lend-lease. But there’s a limit. And so that becomes – you have to sort of usually be pretty judicial about how you’re doing that throughout the year. And that’s been – that’s what – Congress has already stepped in through other mechanisms to basically take the limit off. And that has enabled us to take tons of equipment from U.S. military stocks and send that to the battlefield. Normally from a U.S. security system, it just has to come from the company, where essentially the U.S. acts as the bill payer to a U.S. defense company that then has to wait for the production to happen and then it ships it off. And that’s usually a years-long process.
So there’s been a lot of innovation, but I’m not sure it’s on the – when it comes to the security systems, I’m not sure it’s really on the lend-lease side.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you.

And next we’ll go to a follow-up question from Lauras, Didier, with AFP. Please go ahead.

Q: Thank you. So maybe you should call me Didier. (Laughs.)

Just to come back basically to my original question, how much do you think the problem of the Russian army on the ground is making the nuclear risk bigger? In other words, how much do you think – at some point Putin’s going to realize he cannot win just with conventional forces, and when he realizes that what are the likely decisions he’s going to take? Thank you.

Mr. Bergmann: Maybe I can start on this. And, you know, I defer to Mark on the potential military utility. But I think – I frankly just see a lot of loose talk from the Russians that feel that they are at risk of being seen as sort of perpetually weak. And so part of the nuclear saber-rattling that we’ve seen is to just – essentially out of nervousness on their end that we’ll try to take advantage of that, right.

If you think about – you know, sometimes we always think about things from our perspective but not theirs. You know, they are deploying – a lot of their active combat capacity is now bogged down in Ukraine. And, you know, they border NATO. And there are additional NATO forces being put on the border, not far from St. Petersburg, not far from Moscow. And so I think they’re, you know, trying to signal to us that they can escalate this conflict.

I think if things were to go incredibly badly for them in Ukraine militarily, I still sort of struggle to see how using a tactical nuclear weapon would actually be helpful in that case. You can go through some of the escalatory-risk scenarios and say, well, maybe they would do it to signal, to really have them be taken seriously. But I think they’re already taken seriously.

And then also there’s question of how ready these weapons are to be deployed. My understanding is that we haven’t really seen Russia take any steps that would be necessary to actually employ them.

So I think this is a very intense situation, a very – the potential for escalation is definitely there. I don’t quite see the clear logic behind using that weapon, but I’ll defer to Mark on answering that.

Mr. Cancian: Sure. Thanks.
And I also find it unlikely. You know, I think, as Max said, you know, this is part of Russia’s signaling. And part of the signaling, I think, is about NATO staying out of Ukraine, keeping U.S. – keeping U.S. and NATO forces out of Ukraine. And, you know, in response, you know, the U.S. and NATO have signaled that Russia should not strike any NATO country. And I think both sides have sort of come to an accommodation. You know, we won’t send troops into Ukraine; they won’t strike NATO countries.

The thing about the use of nuclear weapons is that the time to have done that was back when they were besieging Kyiv, when they needed a real battlefield advantage, and that could have won the entire war. They didn’t do it then. And, in fact, you know, they pulled their forces back. So it’s not clear what they would really gain, you know, as Max said, if they used it now. I mean, the stakes are much – you know, the benefit would be much lower.

Also, you know, when you talk in terms of using nuclear weapons on the battlefield, you need to use a lot of them to have a battlefield effect, because troops are all spread out, unlike people in a city. I mean, you could conceivably, you know, use one in some way as a signal. But if you really wanted to get battlefield advantage, I mean, you don’t just use one; you’re going to have to use, like, 10.

The one place I could see Russia possibly using a nuclear weapon is if its armies collapse and the Ukrainians push into Russia proper. You know, this sort of thing has happened in the past. I mean, we would be discouraging, I think, Ukraine from doing that. But in that kind of situation – you know, if the fighting were now on Russian soil – then I can see them possibly using a nuclear weapon.

Ms. Montfort: Thank you, Mark. Thank you, Max.

Didier, before we wrap up, did you have any follow-ups?

Q: No, thanks.

Ms. Montfort: Perfect. Thank you so much.

We are a few minutes away from 12 noon Eastern time, and so I think will bring the questions to a close there. But if you did have any follow-ups or you were not able to ask your question today, please feel free to reach out to me – again, this is Paige Montfort, media relations coordinator here at CSIS – and I’m happy to put you in touch with any of these three experts or any of our other experts at CSIS who are doing research on this topic.
As a reminder, we will have a transcript out for this very shortly, in just a few hours. If you’re on the call or if you RSVPed, I will send that directly to your inbox. And it will also be available on CSIS.org.

Thank you all for joining us today – this afternoon, morning, evening – and we will talk to you all soon. Have a good day.