

Weekly Commentary 9 – 4th Commentary for Feb 2024

Exactly Two Years into the Ukraine War, a Fortress called Avdiivka Falls and Ukraine is Starting to Collapse

The new commander of the Ukrainian Armed Forces was in post for about a week when the thing he pledged to do – the reinforcement of the fortress Avdiivka – unravelled in just five days. How good is the quality of Ukraine’s army?

Not that he did not do anything. He actually send reinforcements into the front. A crack brigade – the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade – was despatched to try and stabilize the front. But it was to no avail. The troops sent were too few, too late, and these men were immediately trapped in a Russian “cauldron” and they came under heavy artillery and rocket fire, and by Friday this week, broke into a disorganized rout, with the troops, both old and new, running away without orders. This is a catastrophe for Kyiv.

Normally a military disaster of this magnitude would go unreported in the western media – as a matter of fact, there would normally be a mushrooming of lies to create a “narrative” to cover it up. This time, the defeat is so unmitigated and so critical, that many articles appeared over the last two days to report it. The first among them is the New York Times, which in the last two years provided a story that Ukraine was winning the war.

Here is the NYT in its own words with phrases in red being my emphasis or own analysis:

Avdiivka, Longtime Stronghold for Ukraine, Falls to Russians

With Ukraine’s forces at risk of encirclement, the top military commander ordered a retreat. In startlingly candid accounts, soldiers described disarray and despair.

Carlotta Gall reported from Kharkiv, Ukraine; Marc Santora from Kyiv, Ukraine; and Constant Méheut from Paris.

Feb. 17, 2024 Updated 2:35 p.m. ET

Ukraine ordered the complete withdrawal from the decimated city of Avdiivka before dawn on Saturday, surrendering a position that had been a military stronghold for the better part of a decade, in the face of withering Russian assault. (Without the formal withdrawal order, most of the army there would have deserted. Reportedly, it was chaotic mayhem.)

“Based on the operational situation around Avdiivka, in order to avoid encirclement and preserve the lives and health of servicemen, I decided to withdraw our units from the city and

move to defense on more favorable lines,” Gen. Oleksandr Syrsky, Ukraine’s top military commander, said in a statement issued overnight. (If he did not act, he would have no army in Avdiivka left)

The fall of Avdiivka, a city that was once home to some 30,000 people but is now a smoking ruin, is the first major gain Russian forces have achieved since May of last year. After rebuffing a Ukrainian counteroffensive in the summer and fall, Russian forces in recent weeks have been pressing the attack across nearly the entire length of the 600-mile-long front.

The Ukrainian withdrawal on Saturday follows a bloody endgame that saw some of the fiercest fighting of the two-year-old war. Relying on its superiority in personnel and weaponry, Russia pounded the city with aerial bombardments and ground assaults, even as its fighters suffered a staggering amount of casualties (but far less than those inflicted on Ukraine).

Outgunned Ukrainian forces had begun withdrawing from positions in the southern part of the city on Wednesday, and since then have been engaged in a desperate battle to avoid encirclement inside the city as Russian forces advanced from multiple directions. As Russian bombers pummeled Avdiivka, Ukraine said its forces had targeted and shot down three Russian warplanes.

Oleksandr Tarnavskiy, the head of Ukraine’s forces in the south, said there had been no choice but to withdraw, given the Russian advantage in firepower and the number of soldiers Russia was willing to throw into the battle.

“In a situation where the enemy is advancing on the corpses of their own soldiers with a 10-to-1 shell advantage, under constant bombardment, this is the only correct solution,” he said in a statement.

The commander said that there were losses for the Ukrainians and “at the final stage of the operation, under pressure from the superior forces of the enemy, some Ukrainian servicemen fell into captivity (these men were reported to have surrendered enmass).”

Even if Ukrainian lines stabilize in the rear of Avdiivka, the city’s fall into Russian control will allow Moscow’s military to move its troops and equipment more efficiently as it presses in other directions.

“Avdiivka is a very important strong point in the Ukrainian system of defense,” because it protects Pokrovsk, about 30 miles to the northwest, a logistical hub for the Ukrainian Army, Mykola Bielieskov, a military analyst at the National Institute for Strategic Studies in Ukraine, said in an interview.

“Taking control of Avdiivka might create an opening for Russia,” he said.

He added, however, that Russian forces lacked large reserves of troops and equipment and were unlikely to be able to push further west of Avdiivka quickly and turn this week’s success into a major victory.

Soldiers reached by phone on Friday, who asked not to be identified given the ongoing military action, described a harrowing bid to escape the city. They gave accounts of racing

past blasted-out buildings as shells thundered from all around and Russians pressed in from several directions.

“In one of the sectors in the town, fighters from the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade find themselves completely surrounded, but they are attempting to break through, and they succeed,” Maj. Rodion Kudryashov, deputy commander of the assault brigade, said in an interview with Radio Liberty.

Some expressed concern privately in interviews that the call to withdraw had come too late, or posted stark accounts on social media of their dangerous and chaotic retreat.

Viktor Biliak of the 110th Brigade, which has been defending the city for the past two years, described his evacuation on Thursday of the garrison known as Zenit, in a southern pocket of the city.

Mr. Biliak, who uses the call sign Hentai, said his unit was left no time for an orderly exit — neither to evacuate weapons and equipment, nor to burn papers and lay mines in the way of attacking Russian troops.

Ten men made a failed attempt to leave on Wednesday night, he said. They had to fight their way forward in a gun battle, but then came under artillery fire.

“Only three wounded made it back,” Hentai wrote on Instagram. He helped rescue one of the wounded men the next morning, he said, a dangerous movement in daylight that cost the unit four more wounded, including himself.

The troops made another attempt Thursday night, and the severely wounded were told to wait for an armored vehicle to take them.

“Groups were leaving, one after the other,” Hentai wrote. Still able to walk, he decided not to wait for the evacuation vehicle and led a group out.

“There was zero visibility outside. It was just plain survival. A kilometer across the field,” he wrote. “A bunch of blind cats led by a drone. Enemy artillery. The road to Avdiivka is littered with our corpses.”

The evacuation vehicle never came for the wounded, he said. The last group left the bunker, and he overheard a wounded soldier asking over the radio about the evacuation vehicle. The commander replied that no vehicle was coming and that they should leave the wounded behind.

“He didn’t know he was talking to a wounded man,” Hentai wrote. “This dialogue on the radio wounded us to our very core.”

His and other accounts could not be independently confirmed, but the soldiers cited in this article are known to be members of the Ukrainian military with a public presence on social media, and the locations of landscapes shown in videos were verified as being in Avdiivka by The New York Times.

As the battle for Avdiivka intensified, Ukrainian commanders fighting in the area were forced to ration ammunition, soldiers said. White House officials have seized on similar accounts to assert that the failure to pass a \$60 billion renewed military aid package in Congress was directly undermining the Ukrainians' fight on the ground. (Not really - the Russians are going to win the war whether Kyiv gets 60 billion, or 600 more billion since they are running out of soldiers and money on its own does not guarantee the delivery of weapons in a time frame that will make a difference for Ukraine).

The Ukrainian government is also struggling to recruit and mobilize soldiers to fill its depleted ranks after two years of often brutal fighting.

Avdiivka and the surrounding communities have been on the front line ever since Russian-backed militants seized territory in eastern Ukraine in 2014, but the Russians stepped up their efforts to take the city in October, launching large-scale assaults to broadly encircle the area.

Those attempts largely failed and resulted in some of the heaviest Russian losses of the war, with tens of thousands of its soldiers killed and wounded, according to the Ukrainian military as well as British and American officials.

Early this year, the Russians managed to break into the city of Avdiivka itself, at which point Ukrainian losses started to increase significantly. At the same time, Russia stepped up bombardment of the city, seeking to smash heavily fortified Ukrainian defenses. As the situation turned increasingly dire, military analysts inside and outside Ukraine worried that the leadership would repeat what many regarded as a past mistake: holding on after it was clear that hope was lost, and unnecessarily expending personnel and weapons.

The withdrawal from Avdiivka was still underway Saturday morning under withering Russian bombardment. The Ukrainian military command said the withdrawal from the southern part of the city had been conducted with "minor losses."

But soldiers posting videos on social media provided a window into how dangerous movement in the area had become. In one video, several Ukrainian soldiers ride atop an armored vehicle just half a mile from the Avdiivka Coke Chemical Plant on the northwestern edge of the city, a landmark.

They drive past the sign "Avdiivka is Ukraine" at the entrance to the city, made famous when President Volodymyr Zelensky posted a selfie video from there in December. Seconds later, the soldiers duck and grimace as shells land just yards from them, throwing up clouds of dust and dirt.

On Friday, the commander of the 2nd Mechanized Battalion of the Third Assault Brigade said that the Russians had used incendiary munitions to ignite tanks storing hazardous fuel at the coke plant.

"When burning, this poisonous substance has extremely severe consequences for the health and even the lives of our fighters," he said in a statement. The wind sent plumes of toxic black smog over the city and seeping into the plant, which the Ukrainians had long used as a stronghold in the face of Russian advances.

It was unclear early Saturday whether the Ukrainian troops holed up in the plant had also withdrawn.

Volodymyr Furayev, a soldier posted at the sprawling Soviet-era industrial plant, said that his unit had been ordered to evacuate. (This is just a repeat of the failed battle of Mariopol where eventually Ukrainian troops eventually surrendered.)

“Leaving the coke plant,” Mr. Furayev said in one post on TikTok. “Everything is being targeted. Hard to know where we’re going. Hello to everyone who knows me. I don’t know if we’ll make it out.”

Oleksandr Chubko contributed reporting from Kharkiv, Ukraine, and Malachy Browne from Limerick, Ireland.

The question arises as to whether the fall of Avdiivka is just another step backwards for the Kyiv regime, or whether this a kick in the door of a rotten structure, with the whole thing crashing down soon enough. This is how the NYT assesses it:

What to Know About the Fall of Avdiivka

Russia’s capture of a city that had been a stronghold of Ukrainian defenses in the Donetsk region is a strategic and symbolic blow.

By Constant Méheut

Feb. 17, 2024 Updated 2:30 p.m. ET

Ukrainian troops have withdrawn from the eastern frontline city of Avdiivka, Ukraine’s top general, Oleksandr Syrsky, said on Saturday, allowing Moscow to score its biggest battlefield victory in months and dealing a blow to Ukraine’s stretched and outgunned forces as the two-year anniversary of Russia’s full-scale invasion approaches.

General Syrsky said he had ordered the retreat “in order to avoid encirclement and preserve the lives and health of servicemen.” Avdiivka — once a city of 30,000 people before being reduced to ruins — sat in a pocket surrounded by Russian troops to the north, east and south. In recent months, they had been slowly advancing through relentless assaults, in a pincer movement.

“The ability to save our people is the most important task for us,” President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine said Saturday at the Munich Security Conference. He added that Ukrainian troops had been hindered by a shortage of ammunition because of declining Western military assistance.

Is the fall of Avdiivka the beginning of the end?

How did the battle unfold?

Avdiivka is a suburb of the Russian-controlled city of Donetsk, which has been on a front line since a Russian military intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014. The city held through eight years of often low-intensity war in the east and then nearly two years of full-scale assaults by the Russian Army after it launched its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The big offensive against Avdiivka began in October, with Russia launching several battalions against the edges of the city and shelling the area day and night. After being held on the outskirts of the city for months, Russian troops broke into residential areas in late January, bypassing Ukrainian fortifications by crawling through tunnels under the streets of the southeastern part of Avdiivka. Earlier this week, they cut off Ukraine's main supply road into the city and then advanced near a coke plant that had been a bastion of resistance.

In keeping with Russia's scorched-earth tactics in Ukraine, Moscow bombed the place to ruins and then sent in wave after wave of troops in assaults that left thousands of dead and wounded, according to military experts.

How significant is the fall of Avdiivka?

Russia's capture of Avdiivka is a strategic and symbolic blow to Ukraine's military. Avdiivka was a stronghold of Ukrainian defenses in the Donetsk region, protecting several key Ukrainian military positions farther west and putting the nearby Russian-controlled city of Donetsk under constant threat.

Taking control of Avdiivka could also create an opening for Russia. Its forces could next turn their sights to strategic cities like Pokrovsk, about 30 miles to the northwest, a logistical hub for the Ukrainian Army.

That would also bring them a small step closer to their goal of capturing the entire Donetsk region, which the Kremlin claims to have annexed but does not fully control.

The capture of Avdiivka, Russia's largest territorial advance since taking Bakhmut last May, could also become a bragging point for President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia as he seeks a fifth term in an election scheduled for March 17. Already, some Kremlin propagandists have praised that military victory as the most important of the entire war.

Avdiivka had been a symbol of Ukrainian resistance since Russian-backed forces first tried to seize it in 2014, and its fall could affect the morale of Ukrainian troops. Soldiers fighting there have spoken of exhaustion and, at times, incomprehension of Ukraine's military strategy as the full-scale war stretches on. The fall of Avdiivka will have an impact on the morale of the Ukrainian army especially since this is now under new leadership which has been no difference in results from the old leadership.

What's the current state of the battlefield?

The fall of Avdiivka is the latest sign that Russian forces have firmly seized the initiative on the battlefield after Ukraine's summer counteroffensive fell short of most of its goals. Russia's military already took control of Marinka, a small town southwest of Avdiivka, around the start of this year as part of a series of localized assaults it launched last fall in eastern Ukraine.

Fierce fighting has also taken place near Kupiansk, a small city about 25 miles from the border with Russia that was liberated from occupation last year. Months of heavy bombardment have devastated the place, forcing most people to evacuate.

The Russians have also retaken small stretches of land in the south that were hard won by Ukrainian troops at the peak of their summer counteroffensive, making progress around the village of Robotyne. Dmytro Lykhovii, a Ukrainian Army spokesman, said on Thursday that Russia now had more troops there than around Avdiivka, suggesting that Robotyne was a key target for the Kremlin.

It remains to be seen to what extent the Ukrainian Army, now undermanned and starved of ammunition, will be able to hold these towns in the face of unending Russian assaults, or whether it must fall back to more defensible positions.

In Bakhmut, Ukrainian troops held out in the town for months, trying to inflict as many casualties on Russian forces as possible but suffering heavy losses in the meantime. Many military experts and Ukrainian soldiers said the move had drained Ukraine of vital resources ahead of its own counteroffensive. (The subsequent counteroffensive was an unmitigated disaster as hundreds of thousands soldiers died for no dent on the Russian defenses).

General Syrsky, who commanded Ukraine's ground forces at the time, was widely criticized for this decision. The rapid withdrawal from Avdiivka stands in stark contrast to his strategy in Bakhmut. "The life of military personnel is the highest value," he said on Saturday. That is a statement from Syrsky, nicknamed the Butcher of Bakhmut.

Ukraine now resembles a patient with a terminal disease who is staring to exhibit multi-organ failure. His longevity is still uncertain but is measured in months, not years. It's not obvious which system will go first and whether that one by itself will be fatal or will kick off the terminal cascade. But the odds of pulling out of the current trajectory are poor.

It's time to step back and consider what Russia's choices might be as Ukraine starts coming unglued.¹ Many commentators are focusing on the question of territorial acquisition because it seems to be hard to get out of the habit of thinking that way. Recall that the object of war, per Clausewitz is:

"War therefore is an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will."

Russia may have a fundamental problem. It has arguably been Putin's top objective, certainly with respect to the US and Europe, to come up with a new security architecture. That was the theme of his much-hated speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007: No one is safe until all of us are safe.

Russia is very far along with one of its key aims, demilitarizing Ukraine, by virtue of not only depleting weapons stocks across the West and producing armaments at a rate the West cannot match, but sadly also by killing or maiming many of Ukraine's service-age men, and now even women. Ukraine is considering and likely to pass what amounts to a mass mobilization bill.

The US is now also committed to arming Israel; it's not clear, given rising criticism across Europe of Israel's genocide, if and when its allies will cut back on weapons supplies given their supposed disapproval. While it was noteworthy that the hyper aggressive German defense minister, Annelina Baerbock, whose country is defending Israel at the ICJ, criticized

Israel's conduct in unvarnished terms. But as the tweet below points out, Germany has not yet cut back on weapons supplies:

The US and key European leaders are whipping up a "Russia will soon be in Paris" frenzy across the continent. As Putin said in his interview with Tucker Carlson, he is not interested in Poland, the Baltics and by implication everything west of that.

The problem Russia has is that, as the US has admitted, the war in Ukraine is a proxy war, with the US and NATO as the protagonists. Even though Russia will soon be able to compel Ukraine to fulfill its will, it can't do that to NATO, its ultimate opponent. So what is Russia's next best outcome?

Analysts have posited that Europe would eventually retreat into what he called "epic sulking" over its loss in Ukraine. But the level of "We need to rearm" hysteria means that will be some time in coming. Fortunately for Russia, the economic cost of Europe divorcing itself from cheap Russian energy and its accelerating de-industrialization will limit how much Europe can do to live up to its fist-shaking. NATO is now proven to be a paper tiger. The US inability to reverse its long-standing, poor procurement practices (overpriced overengineered weapons that not only are comparatively few in number but also don't perform all that well in combat conditions) also means it seeming vanishingly unlikely to catch up with Russia as an arms designer and maker.

And in fact, when the US and Europe have finally internalized that they can't outdo Russia's war machine, and its overmatch in most important weapons categories along with its nukes amount to a formidable deterrent, they may indeed settle down to licking their wounds. But absent regime changes all across Europe, which is not impossible given the number of elections this year and voter unhappiness about their own strained budgets and officials prioritizing warmongering over domestic welfare, Europe will want to engage in as much threat display as possible and stoke hostility towards Russia among its citizens. Putin has called this "threat mongering".

The fact that Russia is conducting what it has conceived of as a special military operation, as opposed to a full blown conventional war, where it would have flattened administrative buildings in Kiev and taking out the Internet and cell phone service long ago, is now leaving Russia with choices that a normal successful combatant in conflict would not face. Normally if you prevail, you occupy the enemy's territory, and enslave its population. The modern variants are manage the occupied territory badly and turn it into a near failed state (Iraq) or rebuild and turn it into a vassal (Germany and Japan). Why bother?

By contrast, it is conceivable that the Ukraine military could break terminally not all that far from where the line of contact is now, which contrary to most historical wars, is well away from the government/administrative center. It has suited Russia wonderfully well to have Ukraine keep feeding weapons and men into contested spots on the line of contact. It's not far from Russia, facilitating resupply and even troop rotation. By contrast, Ukraine has had to schlepp all those wonderwaffen across the country, 600 km from west to east. And Russia is also able to destroy anything that might resemble a military training center, further impeding Ukraine replenishing its now enormous losses, as it did last week outside Avdiivka.

If you have been following the conflict, the fact that Ukraine forces are starting to fail is no surprise. I have written about this for two years. Ukraine is on its fourth army, throwing

barely trained troops, now including women, against combat hardened Russia soldiers, with a predictably short life expectancy.

As many commentators have pointed out, General Zaluzhny's replacement, Oleksandr Syrsky, is in synch with Zelensky's destructive inclination to try to hold ground at all costs. As I said, this is reminiscent of another man in a silly moustache, who used to urge his troops to defend territory to the last man, to the last bullet. Syrsky, also nicknamed the "General 200 (code for KIA)" is feeding more men into the Russian meat-grinder in accordance with Zelensky's wishes and apparently his own predisposition. Note that "Zaluzhny was liked by his men" seem overdone in light of the horrific death count; he's rumored to have given preferential treatment to the Neo-Nazi contingents which seems a more likely explanation for his supposed popularity.² Holding territory is for optics, and Zelensky is inclined to do that to please his western minders and patrons, because it tells a story, in his warped mind, that Kyiv is putting the billions of aid to good use. It is a simple-minded approach that you would find in a former comedian trying to be a war leader. It is almost tragically comical.

Zelensky deems it necessary, as he once did with Bakhmut, to hold what he can of the southern Donetsk city of Avdiivka, despite the fact that the Russians have created a cauldron which they could finish encircling pretty readily. Just a few days ago, reports were out that the gap between the two arms of the encircling cauldron were just 700 meters apart. They have since closed that. With the US funding package still in play, Zelensky cannot afford a serious loss and now he has to explain exactly that just as he is out in Munich to meet western leaders to get more alms.

Keep in mind that continued US support is absolutely essential to the survival of the present regime in Kyiv. It isn't just a matter of needing the monies for the government budget, meaning to keep Ukraine from having to "print" money on such a scale as to kick its current high inflation into hyperinflation. Ukraine has been running a massive propaganda campaign intended both to maintain support from the coalition partners on which it depends but also for its population in its enlistment drive. Positive Western press in turn has likely helped keep morale in Ukraine at a higher level than it would otherwise be by validating happy domestic war talk and persuading at least some Ukrainians that the bad news they are hearing is unrepresentative, that things are not as terrible as they might appear. Zelensky will no longer be able to keep up the pretence that Ukraine has any hope of prevailing, and not even much of surviving as a state, with only 50 billion euros meant as budget support, and then spread over four years. There is economic future for the rump state managed by Kyiv.

Nevertheless, Syrsky is willing to feed the remaining Ukraine reserves into the Avdiivka killing fields in pursuance of this strategy.

The Ukraine leadership has also been moving towards the politically-radioactive move of a general mobilization, even though it will probably get a kinder, gentler label. Not that killing more Ukrainians in the interest of personal survival is a good idea, but when you have ruled out negotiation and surrender, it's the only thing left to do.

But given legislative timing, the earliest that measure could become law is April. And even on an accelerated timetable to secure more cannon fodder, the earliest new forces might get to the front is late April, more likely May. That seems way too late to do any good, even if they were well enough trained so as not to die quickly. But even if the battered Ukraine military can somehow soldier on, the economic and societal costs look untenable. Put it another way,

Russia's special military operation has been highly successful in just two years of war which probably cost the country 30,000-50,000 casualties.

With that long set-up, let's return to our headline question, what happens when the Ukraine military collapses? "Collapse" means a combination of widespread surrenders, retreats/abandonment of positions, and Russian captures of Ukraine forces because they are surrounded and lack the ammo to fight back. Ukrainian soldiers may be brave but they cannot charge into a minefield or artillery barrage and expect to win. They will have to surrender soon enough. The Ukrainian armed forces are history. The fall of Avdiivka is a prelude to that.

Some commentators have argued Russia will make a dash to the Dnieper once the Ukraine line collapses in a big enough way. It would be normal to do something like that to force the opposing side to sue for terms. But Zelensky and the neo-Nazis, who would be stiffening his spine, won't allow that. Once the military is crumbling, Russia can take territory at its leisure (which is again really abnormal in a typical war but this is not that). Russia can still be very productively engaged in first making sure it has eliminated the Ukraine forces near the front, and of taking all of the territory it incorporated in 2022, the remaining parts of Kherson and Zaporzhzhia oblast.

The other reason that a big arrow offensive toward the Dnieper might be seen as suboptimal is the unhinged state of the West. You do not make sudden moves around crazy people. Yet another reason to watch and see how Ukraine comes apart is the administrative burden of occupying territory. That is likely a reason for Russia bulking up its military so much. The Russians are there to stay.

If Russia did want to ratchet up pressure on Kiev, some sort of re-run of its 2022 priming operation might be a preferred move. If Russia is lucky, the government will decamp to Lvov, which would be an admission that they expect to lose Kiev and much of central Ukraine.

The reason for trying to engage in a bit more granular thinking is that many commentators can envision some end states Russia would like, but how to get from A to B is not obvious. The leadership in Kiev will need to be killed or flee; they are not likely to stay at their posts and have Russia impose terms. That does beg the question of what Russia does in the way of a government of Ukraine, particularly if it is not keen about occupying or administering Western Ukraine.

One way would be to return parts of western Ukraine to Hungary, Poland or Romania, from which the Soviet Union took from after WW2 to form buffers. If this is the result, Ukraine will not even be a rump state; it will simply cease to exist.

However, Russians are fabulously patient and Putin is cautious. Once the military starts to crack, Ukraine will enter what some analysts call an overly-dynamic situation. At that time, Russia will be able to observe the pace of collapse of the central government administration and what is happening in civil society. Ukraine is also a huge country, and even subduing chunks of it would be no small undertaking.

So aside from possibly undermining Kyiv and finishing incorporating the missing parts of the four oblasts, one possible path is for Russia to keep biting off pieces as what is left of the central government and the US and NATO are forced to watch and are relegated to missile

and drone attacks, but not enough to change the direction of travel. Kharkiv might be next on the menu due to proximity (and therefore less Poland/Baltic freakout) and high proportion of ethnic Russians. Taking Odessa is a logistical challenge; the best train lines are either through Krivoy Rog or from the northeast across the country. And there is a big river to cross to get there.

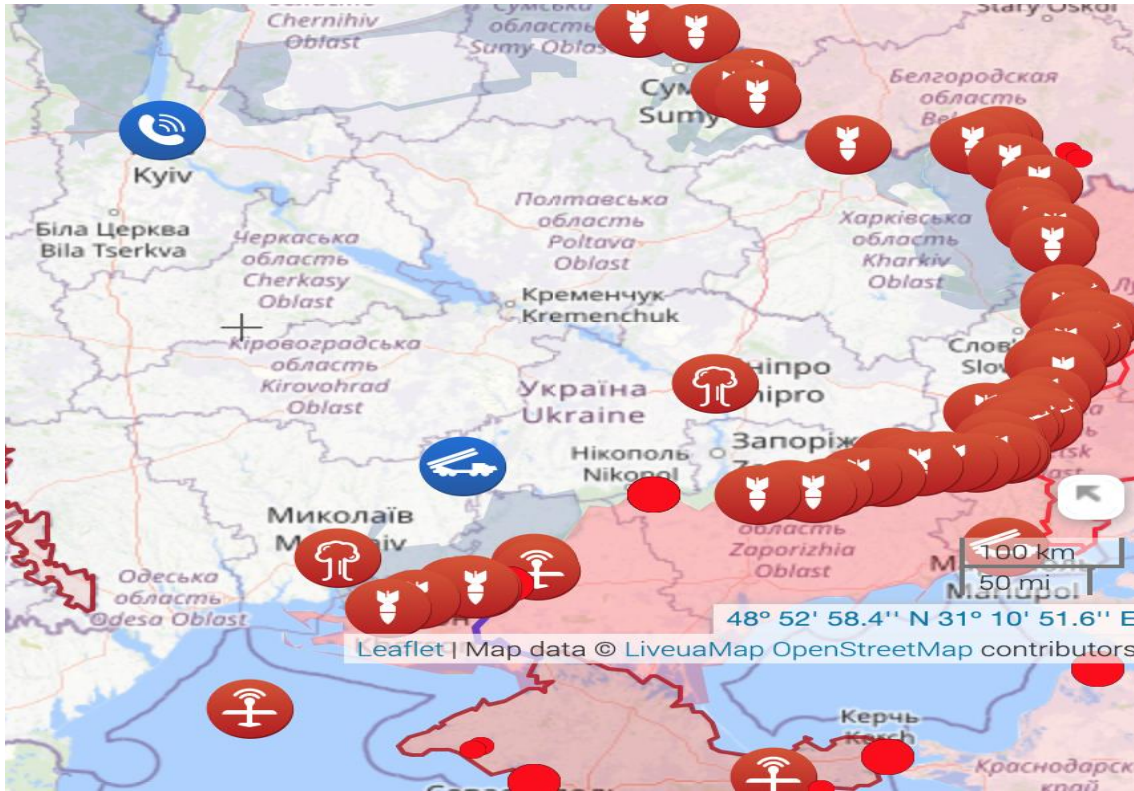
But the other reason for being excruciatingly slow, aside from getting better data, is that with hyperinflation and a highly-likely baked-in economic collapse in non-Russian controlled Ukraine, is that conditions may become so desperate that having Russia come in and take charge may start looking less bad to many of the locals. Again, the longer Russia hangs back and lets more of Ukraine drift into failed state territory, the more this dynamic has the potential to kick in. Remember, Russia fought a bitter war with Chechnya for 20 years and now Chechens are fighting on Putin's side. Ukrainians are not so different from Russians, after all.

These are givens. But Russia still needs to move carefully and deliberately if it is to increase its odds of having what is left of Ukraine not merely be neutral as the result of an imposed settlement, but have a very sizeable majority of its citizens be so sick of war and war-related privations that they will be highly resistant to NATO and western efforts to turn them back to being its pawns. After all, the invitation to join the west is pure propaganda and nothing more than a Mearsheimer primrose path which after the fall of Avdiivka will hasten the process of the local Ukrainians west of the Dnieper to learn how they have been fooled by the collective west.

As such, after two years of fighting, the likely outcome of the latest battlefield success by Russia in Avdiivka is not big arrow offensives to take the rest of Ukraine. Those campaigns across the Eastern Front in 1941-45 cost the Soviet Union 28 million dead in WW2. What would motivate Russia to do the same now? Nothing.

The stated objective of Russia's current special military operation are: 1) demilitarization of Kyiv's Ukraine which it has done by attrition over two years; 2) denazification which is the same as 1 above since the half a million KIA in Ukraine's army includes many in the Azov battalion at Mariopol and the Third Brigade in the just finished battle of Avdiivka. In following the situation, I am now of the opinion that the Russians will likely advance to the east bank of the Dnieper River, which divides Ukraine roughly into two. And there is no additional incentive for Putin to move forcefully, beyond just waiting for the Ukrainians to kill themselves against the solid wall of defences which they have built to make mincemeat of the Zelensky army.

'There are many excellent sites that do a fine job detailing the action on the frontlines. Many analysts have been describing the accelerating Russia tempo across the front line. Other commentators are describing the Ukraine defenses as cracking at multiple contested points. Liveuamp.com, which is pro-Ukraine similarly shows a mass of Russian actions:



Similarly, the Institute for the Study of War's (utterly pro Kyiv) latest Ukraine update tallies Russian advances and positional fighting; it's hard to find any positive Ukraine sightings.

And the mainstream media is not doing much in the way of truthful reporting. For instance, from Friday's New York Times:

Ukraine's military challenges go well beyond any single battle. American assistance, urgently needed, remains in doubt. Ukrainian troops are exhausted, and they lack weapons and ammunition. Air defense systems, crucial to protecting civilians from Russian missiles, are being steadily exhausted by repeated bombardments.

American officials assess that, without replenishment, Ukraine has enough air defenses to last until only next month.

If you checked out the Institute for the Study of War update, they give lead billing to the desperate state of Ukraine air defenses. That's why the Russian air force dominates the battlefield.

Western officials and military experts have warned that without U.S. assistance, a cascading collapse along the front is a real possibility later this year. Hostilities may not extend into 2025.

It would still be at least a couple of months before the lack of renewed aid has a widespread impact, they say. But without it, it's hard to see how Ukraine will be able to maintain its current positions on the battlefield.

By next month, Ukraine could struggle to conduct local counterattacks, and by early summer, its military might have difficulty rebuffing Russian assaults, the officials and analysts say. At

that stage, the war would be practically over and if the Russians don't want to run the country west of the Dnieper, the war will end.

² Victoria Nuland was rumored to have come to Kiev to (probably among other things) persuade Zelensky to keep Zaluzhny. Nuland is close to Neo-Nazi leaders, such as the former head of the Right Sector Dmytro Yarosh. This theory would explain her bizarre, isolated night press conference in what appears to be Maidan Square. It screams that Zelensky denied her the use of government offices.

Note also that former lieutenant colonel Lawrence Wilkerson says Syrsky has a good reputation among foreign military types. So he may be terrible only as a willing implement of Zelensky's bad tendencies. As I see it, the war is almost over.

But the Democrats in the White House as well as the deep state in the US government do not want to leave things be. According to the NYT, they need someone to blame for the fiasco:

Biden Administration Blames Congress for Fall of Ukrainian City

As a bill with \$60.1 billion in military aid for Kyiv languishes in the House, a spokeswoman pointed to Avdiivka's fate as "the cost of congressional inaction."

By Julian E. Barnes

Reporting from Washington

Feb. 17, 2024

The Biden administration said Saturday that the Ukrainian military withdrawal from Avdiivka was the result of Congress failing to provide additional money to support Kyiv's war effort.

Ukraine ordered the withdrawal from the eastern city of Avdiivka before dawn on Saturday, the country's first major battlefield loss since the fall of Bakhmut last year.

"This is the cost of congressional inaction," said Adrienne Watson, a spokeswoman for the National Security Council. "The Ukrainians continue to fight bravely, but they are running low on supplies."

The Senate passed an emergency aid bill including \$60.1 billion for Ukraine this week, but the measure faces an uncertain fate in the House of Representatives, where Speaker Mike Johnson has indicated he does not intend to put it to a vote. The Biden administration has spent months pushing for additional funding, arguing that Ukraine is running out of artillery, air defense weaponry and other munitions.

Ms. Watson said the House needed to pass the Senate measure.

“It is critical that the House approve additional Ukraine funding without delay so that we can provide Ukraine with the artillery ammunition and other critical equipment they need to defend their country,” she said.

Supporters of the aid are exploring ways to force a vote on the Senate bill, which also includes aid to Israel and Taiwan as well as humanitarian assistance to Palestinians in a package totaling \$95 billion, or to create a package that might win Mr. Johnson’s approval.

On Thursday, John F. Kirby, a senior national security official, said Ukraine’s struggles in Avdiivka were the result of shortages of artillery ammunition.

The U.S. could not send additional artillery shells to Ukraine because Congress had not authorized more funding, Mr. Kirby said. As a result, Ukraine’s forces were not able to successfully counter the waves of troops Russia was sending into the city.

Mr. Kirby said that without additional aid to Ukraine, the Russian advances being seen in Avdiivka would be repeated in other parts of the front. American officials have also warned that by March, air defense ammunition supplies will be strained, allowing more Russian missiles and Iranian drones to hit their targets in Kyiv and other population centers.

It is not clear whether the losses in eastern Ukraine will be enough to move Republicans skeptical of sending additional funding to Kyiv. Lawmakers on Capitol Hill have said they have not heard a plan for Ukraine to turn the tide on the battlefield, even if its supplies were replenished.

Administration officials concede that even with more arms, it will be difficult for Ukraine to reclaim all of the land it has lost. But, they added, a well-supplied Ukraine could put more pressure on Russia and eventually be in a better position for peace negotiations.

Besides blaming the fall of Avdiivka on Trump, the Biden White House is also using “lawfare” against the former President. The results of a trial against Trump was announced late last week, and the result was ostensibly negative for Trump. But it is so obviously biased that at appeal, it will likely be overturned. For example, it was reported that Mar del Lago, Trump’s Palm Beach property was valued at \$18 when smaller less developed properties carried price tags of at least \$200m. This is clearly “lawfare” to make it look like Trump cheated on his valuations.

Here is an opinion written by a GOP congressman, Elise Stefanik in the latest issue of Newsweek (no fan of Trump obviously):

The Democrats Are Using Lawfare Against Trump Because They Can't Beat Him

Opinion

Published Dec 05, 2023 at 10:42 AM EST Updated Dec 18, 2023 at 10:48 AM EST

By Elise Stefanik

New York Congresswoman, House GOP Conference Chair

Less than one year away from the 2024 presidential election, poll after poll shows President Joe Biden's chances of re-election diminishing. The panicked response of Democrats has ranged from anonymously leaking statements imploring President Biden not to run again to head-in-the-sand denials about his chances of winning. But by far the most dangerous and un-American tool in the Left's political arsenal is their unprecedented lawfare targeting Joe Biden's leading political opponent: President Donald J. Trump.

The Left has chosen lawfare because winning in the marketplace of ideas at the ballot box clearly isn't suitable for today's Democratic Party, which seems to support limitless illegal immigration, inflationary tax and spend policies, and the unconstitutional silencing of opposing voices.

The egregious and norm-shattering lawfare weaponized by the Left against President Trump is unprecedented. Just over the last year, the FBI raided Trump's main residence. He has faced indictments in two separate federal jurisdictions from the Biden administration and received indictments in two local jurisdictions from Democrat District Attorneys.

Additionally, the Democrat New York Attorney General, who specifically campaigned with a focus on targeting Trump, filed a civil lawsuit against him.

Democrats have opened up a dangerous Pandora's box by breaking legal and political norms to try to imprison President Biden's chief political rival for 2024. It is irreparably harmful to the fabric of America to normalize the reigning political party using its power to lock up its main challenger.

And make no mistake about it: It's no surprise that the culmination of this legal assault comes amid nonstop polling showing that Americans are angry with Joe Biden's poor performance and supportive of a second Trump administration.

If we continue going down this road, there's no going back. The American people fundamentally understands that if the Left can shred constitutional protections and weaponize the government to illegally target President Trump, what can and will they do to the average American? Just ask Catholics, conservatives, and parents at school board meetings.

And a closer look at the legal tactics employed by the Democrats shows just how sinister of a threat this is to America's rule of law. In New York, President Trump is facing a two-pronged attack. Soros-funded Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg issued the original indictment in a case so absurd that even the *Washington Post's* liberal editorial board called it a "shaky" case. At the same time, New York's Democrat Attorney General Letitia James teamed up with Democrat Judge Arthur Engoron to try to put the Trump Organization out of business. Recall that James campaigned on targeting Trump. She said that going after him was her primary motivation to run for office and that she's got her "eyes on Trump Tower."

Attorney General James' case doesn't even have a victim. President Trump repaid the loans to the banks in full and on time. The "crime" in question is that President Trump is leading Joe Biden in the polls.

Fortunately for James, the judge assigned to the case, Arthur Engoron, consistently displays exceptional bias against President Trump. I filed a complaint to the state's judicial committee noting that Engoron has broken several rules in the New York Code of Judicial Conduct. Engoron decreed Trump somehow committed fraud, even before the trial began. And his clerk, Allison Greenfield, has donated thousands of dollars to Democratic organizations, which is barred conduct.

President Trump is also dealing with Democrat Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis' bogus racketeering case in Georgia. Like James, Willis used targeting Trump to further her political career. Willis launched her reelection fundraising efforts just days before her office announced its indictment of President Trump.

Meanwhile, as these local cases are ongoing, Jack Smith is again abusing Justice Department resources to target President Trump. Smith first indicted President Trump over documents Trump had the right to possess under the Presidential Records Act. Then, Smith indicted him for the Jan. 6 riot in a case that attempts to criminalize the First Amendment.

Candidates are allowed to challenge elections. According to Jack Smith's standard, every one of the numerous Democrats who spoke out against or voted against certifying Republican victories in 1968, 2000, 2004, or 2016, many of whom still serve in elected office today, should face indictment.

Smith clearly has a problem with the First Amendment. He has teamed up with highly partisan D.C. Obama Judge Tanya Chutkan to place unconstitutional gag orders on President Trump to stop his criticism of Joe Biden and Jack Smith. His motion requesting a gag order singled out a Truth Social post from President Trump that stated, "Joe Biden directed his Attorney General to prosecute his rival. This is not an independent Justice Department, this is not an independent special counsel. This is being directed by the Commander-in-Chief."

For starters, President Trump was quoting someone in the post. Moreover, what President Trump said is the truth, and Smith wants Trump to be barred from saying it.

The Jan. 6 case from Smith is also dangerous because it serves as the basis for ludicrous lawsuits from activists trying to use a convoluted legal theory to remove President Trump from the 2024 ballot. Fortunately, these 14th Amendment cases continue to fail before the courts.

All of these actions amount to an unprecedented attack on an American politician. Major local jurisdictions, state governments, and the federal government have all unified to expend resources to try to defeat the leading opposition candidate. The United States routinely sanctions foreign countries for these sorts of actions.

This lawfare only stops when Americans hold their government officials accountable for their actions through voting, which is always the most valuable tool in defending democracy.

Republicans challenging President Trump for the nomination need to prioritize the nation over personal political ambitions and drop out of the presidential race to consolidate support behind Trump. The Democrats' radical lawfare is much more effective against a fractured

party, and it's shameful some Republicans seem to be counting on the weaponized legal system to knock Trump out of the primary.

The situation is urgent. The Democrats are a party of projection. They've long assailed President Trump for "breaking norms," but they are the party that's inspired by the Soviet Union's legal system.

This unprecedented lawfare against President Trump cannot continue. The American people are the guardians of democracy, which is why, in 2024, the American people must and will elect President Trump back to the White House.

Rep. Elise Stefanik is a Republican Congresswoman representing New York and the House GOP Conference Chair.

All said, at the end of the day, the Ukraine war has been lost whether or not Trump comes back to end it formally. Except for the sycophants in liberal media, and in the Biden White House, the widespread conclusion among serious analysts who know how to assess these things have concluded the game is up for Kyiv and the clown show called Zelensky.

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Un-Influencer in a World full of Hubris