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Fireside Chat with Rustem Umerov

Rustem Umerov, Defence Minister, Ukraine (VIRTUAL)

Moderator: David Sanger, White House and National Security Correspondent, *The New York Times*

YouTube recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pz2hJuk9M8k>

David Sanger:

Thank you very much Niamh. Thanks to all of you. And thank you Minister Umerov. You've been in your job now for what, about nine months or so as a defense minister, and so it's just about enough time to understand what you've gotten yourself into and we appreciate your coming and talking to the Aspen Security Forum. Let me start you off with what we saw happen last week. President Zelensky, of course, was in Washington and he emerged with some relatively big wins. He got the new Ukrainian European command center, a NATO representative who's going to be arriving in Kyiv, a more stable funding base and so forth. And of course, the phraseology that Ukraine would be inevitably a member of NATO even though there was no date set. I'm wondering if you could give us your evaluation of these and what did you think you've come up short on, and we'll go into those in a little more detail. I

Rustem Umerov:

One just wanted to acknowledge that what people think of NATO in Ukraine. So NATO means peace, NATO means, and the war and NATO means development for Ukrainian people. So we were fighting to become a NATO member for a long time and we belong to Europe and we belong to North Atlantic Treaty organizations. So that's the expectation of people. As the Minister of Defense, of course, I have to focus on interoperability and we have shown to the world that we are operating all kinds of weapons and arms and we are ready to join. That's our focus. Our visit was focused on more deliverables to outcomes as area defense because we need to protect the sky to protect people, to protect the national critical infrastructure and our men and women in uniform. So that was our outcome of the visit, but we appreciate our partner's support and we'll be continuing to win the enemy in our battlefield.

David Sanger:

Well, thanks. Let's look a little more thoroughly at those areas where you say you need a bit of work. We've seen Ukraine enter these rolling blackouts in recent times because the Russians have moved from what was initially attack on attacks on transmission systems a year or so ago to the actual generation systems. I think you've lost about half of your generation capacity at this point, and of course you're suffering through this heat wave where it's particularly hurtful and you'll have the same issues I suspect during the winter. Tell us a little bit about how you plan to protect that

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generating capacity while you're trying to rebuild it. Do you have enough air defense for that? Are there other options available to you for it?

Rustem Umerov:

We always outline that to protect cities like Kyiv, haa, we need area defense to protect people. Secondly, national critical infrastructure, which includes nuclear power stations, which include hydropower stations, thermal power stations, all requirements sports, and it includes many more. So that's why we need area defense and missiles to keep the enemy so that they are not close to us because what they focus is to hit the civil infrastructure. They hit the hospitals, they hit the schools, and we need to protect them. That's why it's not something that we, it's a big country and we need to deter Russia. We need to stop Russia because it continues the invasion. It continues to get a support from many other countries, which are also are against our democratic values. So that's what we are fighting for

David Sanger:

MRR in the world of power supply. We've heard the Russians say they want to restart part of the Zia plant, I think one unit of it, but presumably to supply electricity to parts of Russia. Do you have any chance at this point of regaining that plant?

Rustem Umerov:

Well, we have a strategic plan and operational plan. I won't be probably addressing the operational plan, but as I said, it's illegal temporary occupation. We're trying to get more power to regain the territories, and our strategic objective is of course 1991 borders, and that's why we're focusing to at the moment, to regenerate power and tackle this problem along with partners.

David Sanger:

But do you think you could actually regain the Zaia plant as part of your strategic objectives?

Rustem Umerov:

It is within our focus.

David Sanger:

Okay. Let me ask you a little bit about the precision strike capabilities that you need. Obviously air defense is one part of the plan, but the other part that you've had has been to strike inside Russia and obviously in parts of occupied Ukraine. So I wanted to ask you a little bit about the launch sites from which Russia's mounted many of these attacks, including in iv, including in that attack you referenced on the children's hospital last week. That originated from a base within Russia. That's part of their sanctuary due to the restrictions the US has placed on where you can use the attack S

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did you make any progress last week in getting that area that you can actually conduct military operations inside Russia expanded it?

Rustem Umerov:

Yes. We are asking our partners to lift all bans on targeting military targets inside of Russia because they're targeting our cities, our civilians, and to make sure that they don't come to our borders. We wanted to use long range missiles against the enemy military targets. We had some discussions with partners, some made some announcement publicly, some had discreet discussions. But we are continuing, and we want to say it loudly, we are focusing to the military targets so that they cannot and not able to hit the civilians. So that's a justification and we are fighting with the rules of engagement. So at the moment, the work is still in progress.

David Sanger:

You may have heard President Biden at his press conference last week talk about this briefly, and he said one of the reasons that he did not want to allow too much for a lifting of these restrictions is that he wouldn't want to allow you, for example, to strike Moscow if there was a legitimate military target inside Moscow. Would you strike it?

Rustem Umerov:

Oh, we are protecting our nation. We are already fighting for 10 years and full scale invasion, as you know, have caused us so many internally displaced people that it's up to 15 million people moved from one part of the country to another part of the country and even leaving the country. So we would do everything to stop the enemy, but at this stage we address our partners to allow us dismissals to focus on military targets that are hitting our city. So there are some objects that our partners know and they're focused only to the military targets.

David Sanger:

And those would include, for example, the air bases where they're releasing some of these, the bombers that are releasing the glide bombs and so forth.

Rustem Umerov:

Yes, not limited to.

David Sanger:

Okay. And has the US shown any greater interest in allowing you to expand the arena, and could you be able to strike those targets, say with the missiles that Britain has given you since they are not putting a similar restriction on you?

Rustem Umerov:

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Look, in iv, we repelled the enemy and us and other partners allowed us to use the US and other partner weapons. And that's why we have repelled the attacks and we have decreased the number of glide bombs and guided air bombs and hitting to our territory. And the limit there was a limit on the length. And that's why we want to change it from the lens to the functionality. So as you said, the air basis, for example, if we focus those kind of military objects, it will drive them as what we did in the xi. We drive them out of our territory, so we don't want them to come near to us to hit our civilian targets.

David Sanger:

This is, I think the first day that the new mobilization law goes into effect. So give us a little bit of an update on your troop strength, especially infantry on the front and maybe some assessment of the Russians. What's your thinking about how much longer they can keep up this furious pace of assaults that they've had underway given the staggering losses that they've been suffering?

Rustem Umerov:

They already lost more than 550,000 soldiers killed and wounded, but they're keep bringing contracting from many countries. They're hiring the mercenaries, they're bringing it from Africa. They're using their threats in Asia and Africa to bring more mercenaries. At the moment, since we are fighting the third year we passed the law, we made clear who will serve in the military people that 25 and over because our population wants the younger population to stay alive and continue developing our country. At the moment, there are more than 4 million people already registered in a database. Those that are willing to serve in the army. We're of course ling the Russian propaganda in the West that say that Ukrainians doesn't want serve. Now we have passed the law. We have introduced the digital registration of the and open up recruitment center. So we have, as I said, over 4 million people registered at the moment.

David Sanger:

And on the Russian side, do you believe that they will be accelerating these attacks or do you think they're running out of steam and do you think there's a way that you can go on the offensive, a new counter offensive this year or would need to wait until next year to do so?

Rustem Umerov:

At the moment, there are more than 500,000 enemy troops are surrounding us in the temporary occupied territories in the east and northeast in the south, and they want to increase it by 200 to 300,000 more, which means that they're increasing and they've already have concluded 50% success ratio until the June 1st. So which means that they will be increasing the recruiters and contractors and mercenaries to attack us.

David Sanger:

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Last question for you, since I know your time is so short. If you believe the polls that we're seeing here in the United States, you may be by the beginning of next year, dealing with an American administration that has a different view of how to go supply Ukraine that has said former President Trump has said that he could end the war in 24 hours. I don't know how you do that without entering something of a forced negotiation with the Russians. As the defense minister, it's your job to come up with plan Bs for things that go wrong. Are you beginning to develop a plan B if there is a new administration that takes a very different view of the American interest in supplying Ukraine?

Rustem Umerov:

Well, we believe in American leadership and we believe that American people want their partners and allies to be strong as well, because not many countries support the democracy rule of law and civilized manners. So at this stage, we are focused to the battlefield. We are focused to increase the capabilities locally. That's why we invest in industry, that's why we make mobilization and focus how to win the Russians on the battlefield and whatever will be the outcome, we will be working with America with us and we want its leadership in it. And I think we partners, we've always been through the hard times and we'll find solutions. So we focused more to partners decisions and we'll find the solutions.

David Sanger:

And do you believe that NATO could step in for that leadership if the US pulls back some?

Rustem Umerov:

As we said, we have to increase the civilized world capabilities against the countries autocrats. So we are civilized and we have a muscle. We are fighting the enemy, which is much bigger than us, but we have shown the world that many were wrong about Ukraine. And as we said, we will continue our struggle. We've been fighting for this for many, many decades, many centuries to become independence over our country and we have a vision to become EU country and native country.

David Sanger:

Well, thank you, minister Umoff. You've been very generous with your time. I know we went, in fact a little over the time that you had available, so we really appreciate it. We hope that next time we have this discussion we can do it here in Aspen with you. And thank you very much for joining us and sharing your views.

Rustem Umerov:

Thank you very much for invitation.

David Sanger:

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Thank you, minister. And also huge thanks to our colleagues in Aspen Kiev. They do amazing work under really difficult circumstances. So to Yulia and their chairwoman, Natalie, who's speaking tonight at our Ukraine panel, thank you very, very much.