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Thursday, July 21 [Fireside Chat with International Official: Aspen Security Forum 2023](#)

11:05 - 11:30 PM

Fireside Chat with **International Government Official (VIRTUAL)**

Fareed Zakaria

Thank you so much for doing this. Mr. President. We know you have many, many things to deal with and we appreciate your taking time out of your schedule. We've known each other for a while and so I think I will begin with a very frank question, which is on everyone's mind. The Ukrainian counter-offensive seems to be going more slowly and is has many more difficulties than people might have anticipated. Can you tell us from your perspective? Why you think these difficulties are why you face these difficulties? And what do you need to try to overcome them?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Thank you for the question. Really a very relevant one. I would just like to draw your attention to the change of rhetorics worldwide. And I'm glad to hear that now we're discussing the counter offensive in Ukraine. Ukraine is not backtracking. But progressively liberates its territories which is very important. Last autumn, our servicemen had a powerful operation, and then they started building your brigades. Really time matters. We need to count on the time to be used to prepare counter offensive activities and it was in the presence among the experts. We did plans to start it in spring, but we didn't. Because frankly, we have not enough munitions, and armaments, and not enough properly trained brigades. I mean properly trained in these weapons. Still more that the training missions are held outside Ukraine. Let's still be started. And this is important. Because we started it a bit late it wrong to it can be sad and it will be sure truth understood by all the experts that it provided Russia with time to mine all our lands and build several lines of defense. So definitely, they had a bit more time than they needed because of that they built more of those lines. And really, they had a lot of mines on our fields because of that a slower pace of our counter offensive actions we didn't want to lose our people, our personnel, and our servicemen didn't want to lose equipment. Because of that they were quite careful about the offensive actions. Still. I would say that we are approaching a moment when relevant actions can gain pace because we are already going through some mines locations and we are Demining these areas. I would like to draw your attention. This is not to complain but just to tell you that we did block enough of demining equipment now we are being helped by our partners. I'd like to thank all of our partners, President Biden, Congress, the United States our partners in Europe. Thanks. Thanks. Thanks to a lot of people we had this counter offensive started. Yes, I do understand that i's always better to save victory come sooner, this is what we also want, but the question is the price of this of this victory. So let us not throw people under

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tanks later on. Let us plan our counter offensive as our analysts our intelligence such as and some of our residential areas have been liberated already. So I do believe in our victory.

Fareed Zakaria

When when when we watch the Ukrainian movement, what I noticed is you're using a large number of drones, and many of them most of them and this is the nature of the drones are being lost. You're losing about 10,000 drones a month. Do you have the capacity do you need a massive upscaling of of drones because that seems to be one of the areas where you could this could alter the battle

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Frankly speaking we are yet to resolve certain matters related to the types of weapons in most demand in most deficit, I would still point attention to the long range artillery pieces this is really important. You know, when fighting on the battlefield for our lands against Russia, the key thing is our motivation. And it would be really good us to be at least on a par with them in in artillery but if we would be better and definite definitely new type of armaments, the NATO types are better but that lesson time and definitely we don't have this balance in terms of the range. You know that they have this F300 that they're shelling us with on a regular basis. And it's not just a matter of counter-offensive. It's the matter of resilience of our community of our society. This is very important. People continue working pay taxes and these money go to pay our servicemen are where strength is necessary. Our defense is necessary for everyone. You do know that the civilians are being shelled by drones by jackets on a daily basis. In the majority, it's about kamikaze drones, jackets and others. These are used to bomb us our power sector, our schools, the network of schools and educational institutions, and this is really a challenge. So I would really draw attention to the long range armaments. Again we have been waiting for it for quite some time and let us still have hopes and wait for it with a hope that the United States will resolve the matter. And really, at the moment. It all depends on the lead role of the United States with its defense assistance. It is also important to note the domination in the skies. So we need to tell that Russia is clearly dominated the skies now we are in short supply of more than warplanes. It's not just about one quality but also about quantity of them. We are very thankful to the world for already going through with the matter of training our islands, this is important but besides them being trained, it would be nice to have some confidence and ensure today that we are going to have these planes in specific quantity

Fareed Zakaria

President Zelenskyy I wonder what what you can tell us about what is going on in the Russian army, your troops are encountering them. And I'm wondering, given what we saw happen in Russia over the last few weeks, do you notice that the Wagner forces are not confronting you on

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the battlefield? Or are they back. Is there a change in Russian morale? Are you noticing something about the Russian Army as a consequence of the Prigozhin attempted mutiny?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

I think we can understand what is happening to the strength of the Russian army, or rather the lack of motivation when we see what is happening to the Russian society in the Russian Federation what is happening in their society something like that has been happening on the battlefield that demotivated. You could see that Putin lost the strength of the vertical of his power and the steps made by Prigozhin clearly attest to that. Same is happening in the army they have ongoing and incessant changes in the commanding staff and this means changes for any servicemen regarding of the rank. If your commander is chain, even if your enemy is within. It definitely is telling and I think this is the situation when they're out of balance because of the fact that they cannot show any victory on the battlefield. They cannot declare any victory in economy. For the people on the contrary, their people have become poorer people are not getting richer. Definitely they're less motivated as the servicemen are. And sometimes people who like money and survive and need to survive they nevertheless have freedom. But in Russia with their citizens, they don't have freedom and because of that they are demotivated to the most. They don't see victories in civil life in military activities, and even those who support this policy of war and aggression of President Putin I think this percentage is going down. We did analyze the steps by Prigozhin. We talked about that with partners. And I would say that 4 to maybe 45% of Russian Federation's regions in principle supported their steps and the rhetoric of Prigozhin in spite of him being a representative of terrorist or even the leader of terrorism itself. You can still see that even in that there is a split in the society that is no unity in Russia. And this is why we need to act. The world should not lose the unity because this is the criteria of being victorious. I think our thanks to this resilience, we will be able to retain the attention of the world towards Ukrainian needs and our deficits, and I think that we will be able to attain our goal, our land our people, these with respect to Ukraine sovereignty.

Fareed Zakaria

A few days ago, Ukrainian forces have now acknowledged that they bombed again the Kerch bridge the bridge connecting Crimea to the Russian mainland. Is it a short term objective of yours to destroy that bridge completely? And do you believe that you will be able to reclaim all of Crimea in as part of this counter, counter offensive?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

The objective is to reclaim the whole of the Crimea because it's our sovereign territory, in the liable in Alignable part of our nation and that the Kremlin bridge this is not just a logistical road. This is the route used to speed the war with ammunition. And this has been done on a daily

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basis, and it militarizes the Crimean peninsula. For us this is understandably enemy facility, built outside the law, outside the international laws and all applicable norms. So understandably, this is our objective and any objective any target that is bringing war not peace has to be realized.

Fareed Zakaria

In retaliation, it seems the Russians have pulled out of the grain agreement. They are bombing granaries in Odessa. You're it's becoming much harder to send and sell Ukrainian agricultural products on world markets. Is there any solution? Have you found any way to get Ukrainian grain out now that the Russians are pulled out of the grain deal?

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

First of all, I think it's would be a mistake to compare those two situations. These were artificially tied information about the Russian Federation, let me explain it to you. Russia since the signing of this agreement from the first day of it, and there was by the way, agreements involving Turkey and there were, actually two parallel agreements. Us, Turkey and United Nations and Russia, Turkey international nations, two parallel ones working like mirror each other, but these work to have this corridor to make it operational. Now, what Russia has been doing beside beyond the international laws let me explain to you from the beginning of the signing of these agreements, Russia would constantly regularly block the corridor, the vessels idling at sea, there word appears, launches some would last for two or three weeks, up to 30 vessels sitting there, unable to either enter or exit our ports. Russia did everything to slow down the process and artificially dump the prices on the world's grains markets. Much in the same vein as they did with energy sources, so nothing new for us here. And some weeks before this event, Crimea, Russia would repeat that agreement is to add on 17. Because the world the West Europe would not comply with their requirements, and they would claim the need to lift sanctions. So that way, they tried twisting hands in order to have their objectives completed and these objectives are entirely to their money and their political elites. That said later on, they took this situation around the Crimean bridge, using it just as an example. Just believe me, if you follow the public messages, you will clearly see it has been a scheduled approach. If not the Crimean bridge they would find another example another reason to do it. This is well if the meaning of them. In spite of that we do look for ways we talk to the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres right before this meeting with you. I had a talk with President Erdogan to discuss the crisis. We do see certain ways of going out of it. If we succeed if Erdogan succeeds, if he is even stronger I think everything will check okay. Anyway, everyone has to remember the Black Sea is the sea of all the nations of ours. This is not the sea of the Russian Federation. Ther is Ukraine, Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria. And we are talking to all the countries in the Black Sea region and we have very substantial pragmatic relations, humane and legal relations. And by the

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way, this is very important. We have legal relations with everyone, but Russia because they think that this is their whole thing.

Fareed Zakaria

Mr. President, we're out of time, but I want to give one person in the audience a chance to say hello to you, an old friend of yours. Chrystia Freeland, the Deputy Prime Minister of Canada is here. I wonder if we can get a mic to Christa so that she can just greet the president and maybe even send him a message. Can't hear you? Yeah I think it is now. Chrystia just come up here. Yes,

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Glad to see you Chrystia. We're very glad have you with us.

Chrystia Freeland

So let me ask you a question also. And I think this is the question in the minds of everyone here Fareed started with I think the preoccupation of all of your friends in the world, which is sort of a technical question about the offensive. I saw you with Prime Minister Trudeau in June, and I was very struck by your absolute conviction in Ukraine's ultimate victory. I'd like to hear from you why you are so confident and how you see Ukraine in the world looking when this war is over. But But tell us why you're so sure.

Fareed Zakaria

You see why I'm scared to have her on for longer, Mr. President. She'll take my job.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy

We we talked with your the moments when I was sitting in this building. And unfortunately, the most parts of my country including Kyiv it was under threat. Lots of territories were occupied. But even then our families on our side because our children and we love them not because just we have children. We have children. We will love them we miss them. So this is the life. So the life is on our side. And I hope and I think and I hope that God is on our side where different people you know, absolutely but we live in one Ukraine and I'm sure that the world with with unity is also on our side. That's why I'm sure that we will win.

Fareed Zakaria

Mr President, thank you.

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