Monday, May 20, 2024 / Is Russia winning now?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING IN - Secretary Blinken sings Neil Young’s *Keep on Rockin’ in the Free World* with Ukrainian band 19.99

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): A few days ago, Secretary of State Antony Blinken made a surprise visit to Ukraine and covered Neil Young with a local band.

SCORING POSTS

SEAN: It hasn’t done much to help Ukraine’s war effort, though. Nor has an additional 60 billion dollars of your tax money. Ukraine is still struggling.

BLINKEN MUSIC WINDS DOWN

NEW SCORING IN — An Upward Stomp (minimal, indie, fuzzy, dark)-01

*<<CLIP>> ABC NEWS: Ukrainian troops struggling tonight to hold Russian forces at bay as they advance on eastern towns and cities… the UN reporting more than 10 million Ukrainians have been displaced since the war began.*

SEAN: And the timing is tough. We’ve got a U.S. election on the horizon that could change the country’s fortunes.

*<CLIP> FORBES: Former President Donald Trump: We’re thinking about making it in the form of a loan instead of just a gift.. We keep handing out gifts of billions and billions of dollars and we’ll take a look at it…*

SEAN: What it all means for the war, momentarily, on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

SEAN: Matthew Luxmoore covers the Russia-Ukraine war for the *Wall Street Journal*. He’s currently in Ukraine. We started with the mood.

MATTHEW: Well, the mood in general in Ukraine is a bit subdued, so to speak, at the moment. The war effort for Ukraine is not going so well and Ukraine's forces are being pushed back across the battlefield in the east and the north.

SCORING IN — Bottom Drone Changes-01.A1

*<<CLIP>>DW NEWS: Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelensky has canceled all of his planned foreign trips as Russia intensifies its attacks on the eastern Kharkiv region…*

*<CLIP> BBC: These communities are used to Russia being close.*

*But not this close. <<speaking Ukrainian>> For four days, bombs have rained down here and the window to leave is shrinking.*

MATTHEW: So the mood is rather dour definitely compared to when I was last in the country during winter, which is usually a time when people are less upbeat. But the news from the front lines is not good. And of course, the amount of aid coming in from the West has kind of come down to a trickle, even with the latest aid package.

SEAN: And you've spent some time on the front line recently?

MATTHEW: Yes. We were up in, north of Kharkiv region, close to the area where Russian forces have broken through and launched a new front in the war.

*<CLIP> DW: Intense battles are being fought in two border areas. One in the east, the other in the northeast of the country. Outgunned and outnumbered, Ukrainians are trying to push back the Russian Army.*

MATTHEW: Pouring tanks and other armored vehicles and assault units across the border into Ukraine and assaulting several towns along that border, in particular the largest of those which is the town of Vovchansk.

*<CLIP> SKY NEWS: The center of the town is absolutely devastated. Buildings destroyed, we can hear the sounds of explosions, it's empty, there’s clearly a battle still going on here.*

MATTHEW: …the city of Kharkiv, which we just left yesterday, a city of 1.4 million people, 2 million people, before the war started, lies just 20 miles away from where the fighting, where the fiercest fighting is taking place at the moment. So it is quite a tense time for the north of Ukraine, just as it is in the east really. But this is a new front. So it's kind of stretching Ukraine's forces even more thinly across a 600 mile front.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: And are you saying that Ukraine's at risk of losing Kharkiv?

MATTHEW: No. Most people, most analysts and military experts, and indeed Ukrainian officials and soldiers that I’ve spoken to don't see the huge city of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city, as being at risk at the moment. I mean, the amount of troops that Russia’s throwing into the fight in the northern part of Ukraine near the border, is far too small to, you know, credibly assault a city as large as Kharkiv. Especially with how well it is defended relative to the border area, as we've seen in recent days, the defenses there in the border area were not particularly, well-established. But Kharkiv was a completely different question. I mean, Russia would need hundreds of thousands of troops to lay siege and try and take a city that big. That said, the closer the Russians push, the more pressure it places on Kharkiv, and the more it pushes the Ukrainians back and deprives them of resources. And one big question for Kharkiv Is whether the Russians can push forward enough to place this enormous city back into the range of Russian artillery, which would allow them to really pound the city daily. They're doing that already with airstrikes and these massive glide bombs that they're dropping …

*<CLIP> Forces news: It’s one of the weapons Ukrainian soldiers fear the most. Glide bombs allow a so-called “dumb munition” to be turned into a precision weapon by adding an unfolding wing and a guidance system, the bomb can travel for miles.*

MATTHEW: … leading to, you know, injuries and losses of civilian life on a pretty much daily basis. And of, of course, ruining the city in the process. But if they could put Kharkiv back into artillery range, that would really put massive pressure on Kharkiv And that is most likely Russia's goal.

SEAN: I want to ask you more about resources. How's the Ukrainian army looking now after two years of fighting this war?

MATTHEW: I mean, it's not looking good for Ukraine at the moment. There's kind of two areas in which the situation is particularly grim.

SCORING IN – Somber canopy of dust, BMC

MATTHEW: One is the dire shortage of weapons and ammunition, and in particular artillery shells. Before this war, prominent military analysts suggested the, you know, the era of artillery and tanks and other hardware, military hardware that may be considered old fashioned these days is over. But artillery has played the crucial role …  
  
SEAN: Mm.  
  
MATTHEW: … in this war, which has been in many ways, despite the very widespread use of drones, quite old fashioned in a way as well. And it's been allowing both armies to move forward. And Ukraine has a dire shortage of artillery shells. And I mean, they need tens of thousands every single day.

*<CLIP> BBC NEWS:*

*REPORTER: So these are the last two shells that you have?*

*SOLDIER: Da. (continues speaking Ukrainian)*

*REPORTER (translating): Yes, this artillery officer told us a week ago, blaming western nations for halting supplies.*

MATTHEW: Production in Europe and indeed the US, is just not even close to being sufficient. So Russia, you know, has a vast military industrial complex and is churning out not only artillery shells, which it's also getting from its allies, including North Korea. Russia has the capacity to produce artillery shells. And those rockets, those glide bombs that it's been producing to smash Ukrainian cities with.

*<CLIP> CNN: CNN has learned that Russia is making nearly three times as many artillery rounds than what the US and Europe combined are producing for Ukraine.*

MATTHEW: And Ukraine just cannot match that. It's a much smaller country, and being a smaller country makes it very, very difficult for Ukraine to target the second element of its shortage, which is also a dire shortage of manpower. It can’t just go and use totalitarian means or authoritarian means to dragoon people into the military like Russia can. It’s only recently that Ukraine passed a new law lowering the age for mobilization which the government hopes will bring quite a few recruits in.

*<CLIP> FOX32: President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a law changing the draft age from 27 to 25 years old. This comes a year after the law was passed by the country’s parliament …*

MATTHEW: Both countries, since the start of this war more than two years ago, have decimated their professional armies. And so winning this war or continuing to push forward on the battlefield is very, very much a question of, you know, bolstering your forces with new recruits, new men coming into the fight. And Russia has been doing this again quite successfully after two years of stumbling and learning from its mistakes. It's–according to Ukrainian intelligence and many Western officials–is bringing in around 30,000 men into its armed forces every single month. And part of the reason that's been able to launch this, new, new front in the north of Ukraine and to push forward in the east, is because it's being able to bring so many men into the fight. And again, Ukraine just cannot match that.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Can Ukraine make up for this shortage of military manpower with weaponry?

MATTHEW: This is something that Ukrainian soldiers tell you all the time. It's those two elements. They say that their brigades are understaffed, but they also say that with a great amount of artillery shells, they would find it much easier to pull… to push the Russians back. I mean, we saw this in the fight for Avdiivka

*<CLIP>BBC: Ukrainian troops film themselves as they withdraw from Avdiivka. Exhausted after the longest and perhaps bloodiest battle of the war so far. Russian shells still landing close by.*

MATTHEW: The city of Adviivka was taken because Ukraine just ran out of the weapons to hold back the Russians. I mean, I spoke to soldiers at the time who fought directly in Avdiivka who said that they went into the city as part of an assault unit, an assault brigade, in fact, that was supposed to kind of shore up Ukrainian positions in Adviivka, and when they called in artillery strikes, which is what soldiers do to try and kind of destroy the unit that is facing them, the answer was we just don't have the shells to strike the Russians where you are. And this is just an impossible situation for a soldier when they're already 100m away, or sometimes 50m away from the enemy and trying to storm their positions. It's not just one thing. I mean, manpower is crucial. It is those two elements that kind of interact very closely in terms of constituting what Ukraine needs to to win.

SEAN: With the limited resources that Ukraine has –limited manpower, limited artillery – could they be doing something differently here? To break this sort of gradual descent that they're in, it seems like.

MATTHEW: Ukraine's been supplied with long range missiles that, you know, work even better than drones. That could be used to great effect to strike all these different targets inside Russia, including the airfields that host fighter jets that Russia sends up to bomb Ukrainian cities. But those weapons, which have been provided by Ukraine's Western allies, including the HIMARS multiple launch rockets, and also the ATACMS long range missiles, are weapons that Ukraine can't use as per the agreement it not use those weapons inside Russian territory. So this is quite a big restriction for Ukraine. And since Russia is trying to assault a city that is so close, it's only four kilometers from the border. Ukraine says that if it could use these high precision US supplied missiles to strike those places, then it would have far greater success in weakening Russia's war effort. And, would be able to do something that would really, really help it to decrease the intensity of the Russian assault.

*<CLIP> Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky: Air defense, the biggest deficit for us, I think that the biggest problem… yes, and uh, and uh, really we need today, two PATRIOTS for Kharkiv.*

SEAN: So Ukraine can use U.S. artillery to kill Russian troops in Ukraine, but not to kill Russian troops in Russia.

MATTHEW: Yeah. That's right. So these are kind of long range missiles that the U.S. has provided, and Ukraine is banned from using them inside Russian territory. Now, the US side has in recent days made some you know, what what some Ukrainian officials have described to me as quite vague statements that suggests that there may be something close to the beginnings of a policy change on this …because Ukraine has been up in arms over this policy for many, many months now.

SEAN: Hm!

MATTHEW: But that doesn't change the fact that at the moment, Ukraine's hands are tied. And of course, Kharkiv, this huge city, is right next to the border of Russia, just 20 miles away.

SCORING IN, BMC, KOROBEINIKI

MATTHEW: And it is constantly suffering from these massive glide bombs that are being fired from planes and the basis from which they fly, you know, often not too far away from the border, but Ukraine simply can't strike them because, they can't use those missiles in Russian territory.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: When the West ups its threats, Putin ups his and Putin’s latest is nukes. More with Matthew on that when we’re back on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN:Matthew Luxmoore, *Wall Street Journal*. Remind us what else the west is doing to bolster Ukraine and, and counter Russia right now.

MATTHEW: Some Western countries have promised fighter jets to Ukraine, these kind of so-called fourth generation fighter jets that Ukrainian pilots have been training on in recent months. Ukraine says this would be a crucial addition to its arsenal because it would allow it to shoot down the Russian fighter jets that are careening into Ukrainian cities. Obviously the U.S. approved a very large military aid package to Ukraine in recent weeks, which will make a huge difference at an incredibly critical time.

*CNN: PRESIDENT BIDEN: In the next few hours — literally, the few hours — we’re going to begin sending in equipment to Ukraine for air defense munitions for artillery, for rocket systems; and armored vehicles. You know, this package is literally an investment, not only in Ur- — Ukraine’s security but in Europe’s security, in our own security. We’re sending Ukraine equipment from our own stockpiles.*

MATTHEW: But it's taking time. It's going to take time for those weapons to reach the battlefield. And this is why Russia's trying to take advantage of the situation right now and push forward. And of course, there's lots of statements of support for Ukraine from Western officials. But as we know, as news consumers, Ukraine is not the biggest international story anymore. And this has had an impact on Ukraine's ability, especially President Zelensky's ability to do what he does best, which is to kind of spread Ukraine's message to its international audience.

SEAN: How is Putin responding to the solidarity from the West… to the rising threats from the West?

MATTHEW: Well, Putin, every single time he hears, what he perceives as an escalation in Western rhetoric and indeed changes in Western policy that try and untie Ukraine's hands or give Ukraine more power to resist Russia, he ups the rhetoric himself. So we have heard Putin on several occasions since the invasion started in February 2022, threaten nuclear strikes on unspecified targets in, as a way of responding to what he sees as Western escalations.

*<CLIP> THE TELEGRAPH:*

*Russian President Vladimir Putin: <<speaking Russian>>*

*Hady Mawajdeh (producer): What they are doing now - trying to scare the whole world - it does risk a conflict with nuclear weapons, which means the destruction of civilization. Do they not understand this, or what?*

MATTHEW: Most analysts and most experts say that this is kind of a way for Russia to signal that the US and Ukraine's other Western allies need to back off, and stop trying to escalate this fight.

SEAN: I mean, does it work for Putin to, to threaten the use of nuclear weapons? What does that get him?

MATTHEW: It definitely works. And it works very, very well. I mean, off the record, Western officials say that, in private conversation, that, you know, at least part of the hold in the provision of aid to Ukraine has been the fear of escalation, has been the fear of the kind of Russian escalation that could potentially involve the use of nuclear weapons. The US officials have said this on numerous occasions publicly as well, that they do not want an escalation in the war. Now, this is usually kind of couched in quite vague terms.

*<CLIP> 60 MINUTES:*

*SCOTT PELLEY: I wonder Mr. President what you would say to him if he is considering using chemical or tactical nuclear weapons.*

*PRESIDENT BIDEN: Don't. Don't. Don't.*

MATTHEW: And Ukrainians often laugh at the use of the word escalation because, they don't understand how much more escalated the war can get without without Russia actually using nuclear weapons. But the rhetoric has worked. And I think Putin knows that well.

SEAN: At this point, two plus years into this war, it feels like Russia has every advantage in artillery, in manpower, in these threats of nuclear war. And then politically, there's potentially going to be a regime change in the United States in a few months. And, and mister quid pro quo might win and might shake up Ukraine's support.

*<CLIP> SKY NEWS:*

*Former President Donald Trump: Putin and I get along fine. We get along very well. That’s a good thing, not a bad thing, the fake news…*

SEAN: And meanwhile, I'm reading reports that when Macron uses bellicose language, the United States is telling him to tone it down. Is there an impetus for Ukraine, for Zelensky to try and end this before, I don't know, November? January?

MATTHEW: Well, this is obviously the toughest, toughest question of this war. And I think it really, really divides the community of people who are most actively following the war and including, you know, the community of, Western officials and governments in the West, some of which are clamoring for a peace deal as soon as possible. And others, of which are backing Ukraine's line, which is that…quite a plausible line, I should say, because, you know, we've seen this precedent in the past ten years. And indeed and indeed during the Cold War, which is that if you allow Russia a ceasefire, it will simply regroup, strengthen its forces, recruit more men and then push again on an even more massive scale into Ukraine to try and seize its cities. So Ukraine says that, peace deal, a ceasefire is completely out of the question because it will simply allow Russia to reconstitute its forces. And take a pause. On the other hand, Ukraine is increasingly under pressure, I think, to if not, stop talking or start speaking in a way that suggests is open to negotiating with Russia, then at least to offer a very, very specific path to victory on the battlefield that, you know, the Western allies who are supplying the aid find convincing.  
  
SEAN: Hm.

MATTHEW: Because Ukraine's counter-offensive in the summer of last year, summer into the fall, failed to seize back his to take back a significant amount of territory. And that was really, that really followed the largest influx of Western arms and equipment, that we've seen since the war started. And, and we're not going to see that kind of influx again. So since then, the pressure on Ukraine has definitely mounted.

SEAN: The pressure is mounted to negotiate a victory for Russia.

MATTHEW: Well, I mean, it depends how you would define it. And of course, we don't know what the peace, talks would, what kind of agreements they would come to. I mean, it definitely wouldn't be a victory for Russia in the terms that Ukraine would agree to. And it's all quite a moot point in a way at the moment. And it's all quite hypothetical because not only is Ukraine not agreeing to peace talks because it says that Russia's line is simply untenable. And not only is Russia saying that no peace talks are underway, but also there is no clear sense of how the two sides’, you know, widely divergent, positions could overlap or where they could overlap. So on one hand, there is pressure from some quarters for Ukraine to negotiate an end of the war, which almost certainly would mean allowing Russia to hang on to some of the territory it sees, especially because right now Russia's in a favorable position on the battlefield, and that can change, of course. But that's the case at the moment. But also, you know, it's, it's simply not, kind of something that Ukraine is seriously, speaking about publicly at the moment.

SCORING IN, Loopbox Orange, BMC

SEAN: But if it were, say, to lose the United States’ support, it might have to?

MATTHEW: If it were to lose the support of the United States, it would lose the war. And I mean, this is what Kiev says very, very publicly. This is what President Zelensky says. And all the officials from his level on down. So Western support is absolutely crucial to keeping Ukraine in the fight. Yes.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Matthew Luxmoore. W S J dot com.

Our program today was produced by Victoria Chamberlin, edited by Matthew Collette, fact-checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir.  
  
I’m Sean Rameswaram and this is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]