

Ep 10 – Zelensky Fires His Defense Minister: Soldiers Speak Out — Rob Lee, Ryan O'Leary & Dima Putiata on the Week That Shook Kyiv (Part 1)

July 20, 2026 • Duration: 1:26:21

"Gut the General Staff": Two Soldiers and an Analyst on the Fedorov Dismissal and the Protests in Kyiv

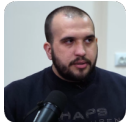
Speakers on this Episode:



Samuel P.N. Cook
Founder



Rob Lee
Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy



Dmytro Putiata
Drone Warfare Expert / Ukrainian



Ryan O'Leary
Military @ The Chosen Company

Episode Summary

In this explosive episode of the Ukraine Military History Podcast, host Sam Cook alongside analysts Rob Lee and Dima Putyata dive headfirst into one of the most tumultuous weeks in Kyiv's recent history. Following President Zelensky's shocking decision to dismiss his entire cabinet—including the widely respected Defense Minister Mykhailo Fedorov after only six months in office—the hosts examine a government crisis that has sparked active protests on the streets of the capital. This episode dissects the political calculations behind the drastic reshuffle and what it means for the future of the nation's defense.

Joining the panel is Ryan O'Leary, an active-service member in the Ukrainian Armed Forces who brings an unfiltered, boots-on-the-ground perspective to the high-level political drama. Together, the team explores the immediate reaction of soldiers on the front lines to this sudden leadership turnover. O'Leary doesn't hold back as they debate the stifling effects of military bureaucracy, the chaos of rapid institutional change, and whether these top-down reforms are actually helping or hurting the men and women in the trenches.

Beyond the political theater in Kyiv, the discussion shifts to the brutal realities of the ongoing conflict. The analysts and O'Leary tackle the strategic debates defining the current phase of the war, including the efficacy of attrition strategies, escalating pressure on Russian infrastructure, and the ever-evolving role of modern drone warfare. By analyzing both the tactical adaptations required on the battlefield and the overarching search for a clear strategic objective, this episode provides a rare, dual-perspective look at a war fought both in government offices and active combat zones.

This is the first of a compelling two-part series that bridges the gap between high-level geopolitical strategy and the raw reality of frontline service. Whether you are looking to understand the political friction in Kyiv or the evolving tactical landscape of modern warfare, this episode offers an indispensable, insider analysis of a critical turning point in Ukraine's history. Tune in to hear the

voices shaping the narrative from the very heart of the conflict.

Show Notes

- 0:00 – The Sudden Cabinet Crisis in Kyiv
- 3:35 – The Public Reaction to Reform
- 8:30 – The Soldiers' Perspective on Progress
- 12:44 – The Challenge of Military Bureaucracy
- 16:41 – The Problem of Rapid Turnover
- 19:50 – The Shift to Open Communication
- 25:10 – The Search for Clear Strategy
- 31:23 – The New Leadership and Public Relations
- 34:12 – The Battle for Public Perception
- 38:20 – The Debate Over Attrition Strategies
- 42:49 – The Pressure on Russian Infrastructure
- 46:44 – The Impact on Occupied Territories
- 51:11 – The Cost of Offensive Operations
- 56:37 – The Role of Modern Drones
- 59:48 – The Window for Tactical Adaptation
- 1:03:23 – The Reality of Drone Assaults
- 1:09:27 – The Definition of Strategic Objectives
- 1:12:20 – The Human Element of Leadership
- 1:15:05 – The Realities of Regiment Management
- 1:20:54 – The Path to Institutional Reform

Chapters (20)

- | | | |
|----|---|-------|
| 1 | The Sudden Cabinet Crisis in Kyiv | 0:00 |
| 2 | The Public Reaction to Reform | 3:35 |
| 3 | The Soldiers' Perspective on Progress | 8:30 |
| 4 | The Challenge of Military Bureaucracy | 12:44 |
| 5 | The Problem of Rapid Turnover | 16:41 |
| 6 | The Shift to Open Communication | 19:50 |
| 7 | The Search for Clear Strategy | 25:10 |
| 8 | The New Leadership and Public Relations | 31:23 |
| 9 | The Battle for Public Perception | 34:12 |
| 10 | The Debate Over Attrition Strategies | 38:20 |
| 11 | The Pressure on Russian Infrastructure | 42:49 |
| 12 | The Impact on Occupied Territories | 46:44 |
| 13 | The Cost of Offensive Operations | 51:11 |

14	The Role of Modern Drones	56:37
15	The Window for Tactical Adaptation	59:48
16	The Reality of Drone Assaults	1:03:23
17	The Definition of Strategic Objectives	1:09:27
18	The Human Element of Leadership	1:12:20
19	The Realities of Regiment Management	1:15:05
20	The Path to Institutional Reform	1:20:54

Full Episode Transcript

Chapter 1: The Sudden Cabinet Crisis in Kyiv



Samuel P.N. Cook [0:00]

Welcome back to another episode of the Україна Military History Podcast. My name is Samuel P.N. Cook. I'm the founder of the Україна Military History Institute and the co-host of the Україна Military History Podcast, where we examine Ukrainian military history from the beginning all the way to the current war against Росія. Today's episode is from the current war series with our military analysts Rob Lee, Dmytro Putiata, and a special guest, Ryan O'Leary, who's an active service member in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. What they were discussing today, which is timely and a huge historical moment, is the dismissal of the cabinet under President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. As of July 15, 2026, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy dismissed his entire cabinet, the prime minister, and submitted a new set of candidates to take over, including the new prime minister. But most controversially, he dismissed the defense minister Mykhailo Fedorov, who'd only been in office for six months, was widely respected by a lot of members of the military but also Ukrainian civil society broadly, and his dismissal has triggered a very big crisis inside Ukrainian government and civil society, with protests on the street for the second day in a row as of today's filming. What Rob Lee, Dmytro Putiata, and Ryan O'Leary all get together and discuss is a very lengthy discussion on the thinking behind this move, the political ramifications of it, how the soldiers feel, and how society feels about it. Of course, all of them are living here in Київ like myself, and we split it up into a two-part series because there's just so much material here. I want to give you a chance to digest it. The first episode here is really about the political thinking behind this, the decision-making, introducing you to Ryan O'Leary, as this is his first time appearing on the podcast. They go into this in detail, with some colorful moments, especially with Ryan O'Leary, who is not holding back on what a lot of soldiers feel, which he is communicating through his position here on the podcast. So enjoy.



Rob Lee [2:08]

All right, everyone, this is Rob Lee. It's another installment of the Ukrainian Military History Podcast. As usual, I'm joined by my colleague, Dmytro Putiata, and this time with my friend Ryan O'Leary, whom we've talked to many times before. Guys, good to see you again.



Dmytro Putiata [2:24]

Good to see you, too.



Ryan O'Leary [2:25]

Good to see you.



Rob Lee [2:26]

All right, we were filming this on July 18, on Friday the 18th.



Ryan O'Leary [2:30]

17th.



Rob Lee [2:31]

17th. Okay, thank you, Ryan O'Leary, already helping. It's on the 17th, so it'll probably come out in a week or so. Basically, we're going to discuss the events of the week. It's been a pretty tumultuous week here in Київ, where there's been a government reshuffle. The big news is that the former defense minister Mykhailo Fedorov has been replaced. Right now, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has put forward Khmara, the former commander or the acting head of Служба безпеки України, former commander of Служба безпеки України. This has led to significant pushback. There have been protests in Київ, protests in other places. There's been a bigger generational discussion because the conversation is partially about the younger generation versus the older generation, and a variety of interesting topics here. So the main thing we're going to talk about is what's happening right now and ask both of you, since you're veterans—you're still serving, Ryan O'Leary, and Dmytro Putiata, you got out—what is your take on what's happening, talk about some of the internal problems in the Ukrainian military, and your take on the developments this week.

Chapter 2: The Public Reaction to Reform



Dmytro Putiata [3:35]

I think it would be great because from what I saw on Twitter, frankly speaking, people are definitely a little bit delusional in terms of everything. You can see a lot of support for Mykhailo Fedorov, but I think the underlying idea is not only just to support Mykhailo Fedorov as a person, maybe as a future politician, but the idea here is not to allow other people with maybe not the best past to take this position. But we can see that some people from the National Guard of Ukraine supported the Ihor Klymenko composition, which was quite surprising for me, frankly speaking. At the same time, we see these changes. I don't think the President will turn it over, so we will continue seeing this kind of development, or I would say degradation rather, and we will have a new Ministry of Defense. Mykhailo Fedorov, at his latest press meeting, told the public about a lot of problems that the Ukrainian Army has. That's absolutely true. Some of them appeared during this war; others have lasted for decades. It seems like, especially after four years

Dmytro Putiata (continued)

in the army and being part of the system, some of these things are not changeable, to be honest, at least here and right now. It's very hard to do reforms during a war for any country, but the thing is that you definitely need to do this. You must do reforms, even though they will be painful and not everyone will like them—not because they might be bad, but just because people might not understand the underlying idea due to a lack of experience or maybe a tunneled way of thinking and other things. But right now we have quite a bad situation. Mykhailo Fedorov put everything on red and officially accused Oleksandr Syrskyi of a lot of failures, which you can support or you cannot. It depends. I do want to say that I strongly support Mykhailo Fedorov in all of his recent statements, because I know that just as it is for Mykhailo Fedorov, the same is for Oleksandr Syrskyi sometimes: it's very hard to change something even if you're in charge of it. Every time we have a new president here in Україна, people expect way too much from a person or from Parliament. You want to see quick reforms in five or six months, and everything should be changed drastically, but it doesn't work like that. In some cases, for big reforms, it takes five or more years before you see that kind of impact. It reminds me of recent articles where journalists had a conversation with a Ukrainian battalion or brigade commander anonymously, who said, "I don't feel the impact on the frontline because of missile strikes." Of course you don't, because it takes a lot of time. You cannot just destroy 40 trucks and a couple of bridges and see an instant impact. It takes a lot of time, at least six months, even more. Then you will see the Russians slowing down. You cannot only rely on missile strikes and think they stopped the Russian advance. The Russian advance stops at the tactical and, of course, the operational level, and of course with pressure at the strategic level while we are targeting strategic targets like refineries, factories, and stuff like that.



Rob Lee [7:34]

So you mentioned Ihor Klymenko, the head of the Interior Ministry, whose name was put forward this week as the initial choice to replace Mykhailo Fedorov. It appears that he didn't have enough support yesterday, and so the reporting says that Volodymyr Zelenskyy came up with multiple names to replace Mykhailo Fedorov and ultimately chose Khmara, at least in the acting role, but it's still not clear exactly who is going to replace him. And as you were saying before, the commander of the Azov Brigade, Denys Prokopenko, and the commander of the Khartia Brigade, Cornet, both supported him and said positive things. Other people did as well, but there was in general a backlash to his name being put forward compared to Mykhailo Fedorov, because Mykhailo Fedorov is seen as a more modern-facing guy, whereas you might not get the same thing from the Interior Ministry, which doesn't always have the best reputation historically. Ryan O'Leary,

Chapter 3: The Soldiers' Perspective on Progress



Ryan O'Leary [8:30]

what's your take on this week? Oh boy, there's a lot to unpack. Let's keep the language here PG. There have been a lot of changes. I think Україна shoots itself in the foot all the time with this stuff. If you ask anyone who's served for a while, the changes that were happening in 2026 have been mainly positive. You have better logistics, a better supply of drones, and some brigades, for the most part, were being listened to more when it comes to procurement. I think the standardization of the drone warfare spectrum was a good idea, so things were moving in a very good forward pace and forward momentum. At the Ministry of Defense level, it was probably the first time where the MOD was actually doing public outreach, actually showing results, moving forward, innovating, and

Ryan O'Leary (continued)

doing stuff. Look, I've been here since 2022. Typically, the MOD is the MOD; nobody really knows fully what's going on or who's doing what. Mykhailo Fedorov sort of changed that, and more stuff was becoming public, like, "Hey, we're trying to do X, Y, Z. This is where we're at with this part, this part, and this part." So I think for Ukrainians, it was a huge change of pace. I think for service members in general, whether foreign or Ukrainian, it was a positive thing and a morale booster, saying, "Hey, look, they're actually listening to us." I do have my criticisms, obviously. I think the foreign side of things was going really slowly, but it's never really been a priority for Україна. I think one of the biggest issues that Volodymyr Zelenskyy is going to keep facing is that they always keep changing the ministers—whether the minister of defense, the prime minister, or the minister of whatever department—but at the end of the day, there's one area that never changes. I think next time, instead of messing around with the ministries, they should just gut the General Staff and switch it out. That's my personal opinion.



Rob Lee [10:56]

Pretty bold opinion.



Ryan O'Leary [10:57]

But look, man, we've been facing the same issues since 2023 with the mindset towards mobilization, the morale, and, I would say, respect of the ministries and respect of the military. There's just been a gradual decline. And if we look at who's been in charge the majority of that time, the only ones that aren't changing is the General Staff. So if—and I put this out on Twitter two weeks ago—if you're running a business and you consistently have employee turnover, low work quality, and low work effort, do you just consistently keep that going, or do you find out what's wrong with the management and change up the management? Your military is the same thing; it needs to be a well-oiled machine. If it's only oiled in certain parts and not the other, then you need to change the leadership out, whoever that would be. I don't know, I just know it's not working as it is, especially for foreigners at the General Staff level. I mean, we're in year four of the war, and as a foreigner, we don't have access to Army+, and we don't have access to Diia. The residency route is a mess. You can't transfer from the National Guard of Ukraine to the land forces legally. You can't transfer from the National Guard of Ukraine to SSO. The only way to do anything is basically to cancel your contract, wait two months, and sign a new contract. There's this issue where it's hard to retain foreigners, but at the same time, it's hard to retain the mobilized because everyone goes AWOL. There are a lot of compounding issues that just aren't getting addressed. So change the management, address the issues, and move on.

Chapter 4: The Challenge of Military Bureaucracy



Rob Lee [12:44]

Right. I want to come back to that because you wrote a piece for Substack about how foreign fighters are treated and some recommendations on how to improve the system. We'll come back to that in a second. I think Mykhailo Fedorov has been in charge for about six months, so it's a short tenure. The previous minister before that was also in for about six months. I think you need ministers in place for longer because, in particular, being the minister of defense is really a bureaucratic role, and you have to understand the bureaucracy. It's similar in the United States, where for a secretary of defense who's

Rob Lee (continued)

at war, it's nice to have a military background, but you need to be someone who understands the bureaucracy and how to run it. One of the benefits of Mykhailo Fedorov is that because the ministry didn't change information for five years or whatever, that ministry, when the war began, started taking on new responsibilities. The MOD was taking care of regular procurement for artillery, tanks, and regular systems. The Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine took over procurement of UAVs, new technology, and new innovations. And of course, Mykhailo Fedorov set up Brave1, this incubator startup thing for the Україна defense companies. So he had his hands in a lot of things. When he took over as minister of defense, he already had a background seeing problems in procurement, problems in the defense industry, foreign support, and so on. He was almost uniquely in a good position to understand and to make changes quickly without having to take six months to learn what's happening. He actually had a good idea early on. I thought it was quite positive when he was chosen initially for that reason. He is quite tech-savvy, and this war is a high-tech war. I think a lot of people—I feel like I'm too old in some respects because the drone stuff changes very quickly. I did not study radio signals enough when I was in the Marines; I should have. But a lot of those things are much more complex, and you need to have an understanding of these things. So when he came in, he had a number of reforms he tried to implement. He had one about new contracts for service members, which was trying to fix the mobilization system to some extent. There are other issues about trying to have equality in brigades of manpower, where everyone has the same amount of manpower. Right now, there is a significant variation where some brigades get very few people, some regiments get a lot of people, and it's not equal at all. And also some kind of standardization of drones because for DJI Mavic, for commercial drones, and FPVs, units always rely on donations. They don't get enough from the government, and he tried to streamline that among other things. I think a lot of these things were positive steps. The execution didn't always work, and it's not clear that execution is easy in that respect, but conceptually the ideas were good. Whether or not it would have worked over time is a broader question. But again, he only had six months. It's hard to achieve what you want in six months. I would say the general feeling is that the situation has gotten better in the war over the last six months. Now, to what extent is that due to him being minister of defense or other factors? It's probably a combination. Go ahead.



Dmytro Putiata [15:49]

You're absolutely right; it's definitely a combination. We cannot praise or criticize one man or one ministry for everything. You mentioned that Mykhailo Fedorov was the Minister of Defense for six months. But before Mykhailo Fedorov, we had Denys Shmyhal, who was the Minister of Defense for much less than six months. We continue doing these kinds of replacements without giving people a chance. Of course, the previous Minister of Defense, for example, Rustem Umerov, was the Minister of Defense for a long period of time. If we look back at how it happened that Mykhailo Fedorov became the Minister of Defense, we can understand what happened in Україна back then. We had this scandal with the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine, where the president decided to...



Rob Lee [16:38]

Shuffle the board.

Chapter 5: The Problem of Rapid Turnover



Dmytro Putiata [16:41]

To do kind of nothing, but at the same time to replace some people, and Mykhailo Fedorov became Minister of Defense. I think that he would never have been Minister of Defense if this scandal hadn't happened. Unfortunately, we have these problems with replacing people in a couple of months, not only from the presidential perspective but also in the army. Somehow we think that if you have a new brigade commander, for example, he needs to be good in a couple of months. But the point is a brigade consists of 4,000 to 5,000 men. There are a lot of things in a brigade. You need a lot of time to find out who is good there, who is not, and how to communicate with them. I know a couple of brigades where they change the brigade commander three times per year. It's not enough for a potential colonel or major who is in charge of the brigade to show himself as a good leader, as a good manager. So it's one of the problems that we definitely will discuss later, but I don't really understand why we expect so many changes in such a short period of time. We really expect way too much. Talking about these improvements on the frontline, we need to understand that they started maybe more than a year ago when the Russians changed their tactics from normal assault groups with infantry fighting vehicles to groups that consisted of 7 to 10 stormtroopers with the support of UAVs. This so-called infiltration, of course, appears right now to be definitely not as efficient as the Russians expected it to be. It's like you started something one and a half years ago, and right now we see the result. Now we see the results that Ryan O'Leary mentioned. We definitely see this new approach of defense, where we gave our maneuver brigades more capabilities. That was one of the biggest problems that we had and we still have, because right now we see that, for example, the Unmanned Systems Forces are trying to—which is absolutely right—put the attention on missile strikes and deep strikes. But before that, and still right now, they have thousands of drone operators who are working at the tactical level, literally fighting from the zero line to 10 kilometers deep—maybe in some cases more, but this is the vast majority of them. Not surprisingly, they're working with the same tools as maneuver brigades did, and still do. So it's definitely a lot of things that started before, and right now we see much better results because of this.

Chapter 6: The Shift to Open Communication



Ryan O'Leary [19:50]

I think too, I don't know, again, I agree with you. I don't know if you can put everything on Mykhailo Fedorov or before Mykhailo Fedorov. But the biggest thing that Mykhailo Fedorov did is he opened it up. He showed, "Hey, these are results so far. This is what we're moving to." So I feel there was just more communication. He kept the Ukrainian people more aware of what's going on. There were fewer questions on, "Hey, what is the Ministry of Defense actually doing?" The last six months, we were never questioning what the MOD is spending the money on or what they are doing in procurement. We saw the increase of our drones that we were receiving with the unit I'm in. You could see the gradual shift from this whole "kill everyone at a kilometer deep at the front line" to, "Hey, now we're expanding." The Hornet gets a lot of it, but there's other fixed-wing mid-strike drones that, if you pay attention on certain Telegram channels, you can see a drastic increase in. So I don't know if you can give all the credit to Mykhailo Fedorov, but what you can give him is that he was the one saying, "Hey, this is what we're actually doing." He was more open about it. And with that, the biggest thing that I've noticed with Ukrainian society is there's always this fear and question of what the ministers are doing, what the government's doing. And I think by Mykhailo Fedorov opening up the Ministry of Defense a little bit more than what's normally there, it brought some trust back into what people perceived as the MOD actually doing. I think a lot of people, Ukrainians and foreigners, also then attribute all that to Mykhailo Fedorov. But in reality, him just opening

Ryan O'Leary (continued)

up, doing better at press briefings, bringing on advisors like Serhii Flash and Serhii Sternenko, and doing outreach actually showed, "Hey, this is the actual improvement." So even if it's not all attributed to Mykhailo Fedorov, him opening up and showing where money's getting used, where resources are, and where the time's being spent, I think it restored a lot of faith in the MOD, at least up until now. I think with this whole reshuffle—and I think Westerners also need to understand once you fire the Prime Minister or the Prime Minister resigns, whatever, the ministers all get pulled out too. So they didn't just fire Mykhailo Fedorov; it had to be done legally. But they could have also then re-put him as a candidate. But I think people need to understand that the trust in the institutions is the biggest thing that's lacking in Україна, which is like, look, I don't hate Oleksandr Syrskyi, I don't like him, it's whatever. But the biggest thing is there's no trust in the General Staff anymore. There definitely isn't with foreign fighters. And I don't think the Ukrainian servicemen like the General Staff very much either. Obviously, they won't speak out. I'll speak out because I'm a foreigner. They put me in jail, no big deal. I'll get back out and go back to my unit. I've been here four years, and I've been in far worse than trouble with the Ukrainian government. But I think the biggest thing that Mykhailo Fedorov did that was an advantage or a positive was basically, and probably not even on purpose, he brought some trust back into the MOD, back to the public, and that's the biggest thing that's lacking in Україна. That is why we have mobilization issues, partly, not fully. So I think whoever it is, whether it's Khmara or the former interior minister, whoever does it, they just need to be more open and they're going to have to build that trust back up again. We're probably below zero now for trust.



Dmytro Putiata [23:27]

I absolutely agree with you that he did great in terms of showing what they're planning to do because we definitely had a huge gap in this. And I think that's the reason why people support him. It's all about public affairs. Yeah, because he's a former SMM manager and he knows how to sell, how to introduce himself to the public.



Rob Lee [23:53]

But another thing about this is that, after the summer offensive failed in 2023, it didn't seem as though Україна had a coherent strategy for about two years.



Ryan O'Leary [24:03]

Well, I don't think anyone really ever took the time to lay out a strategy to the public. Well, whatever, you can argue: was Mykhailo Fedorov's strategy good? Was it wrong? Was it burning down the house? Depending on who you ask, but at the end of the day, at least he voiced a strategy. And again, that's what helped rebuild the trust for the Ukrainians and probably the foreign partners as well, because basically he was like, "Hey, look, I'm doing this, this, and this, and we want to do it within this timeframe. Here is our feedback loop. Here's a number you can call or a Telegram you can message, and we'll listen to your feedback." Do they listen to all that? Probably not, but at least he laid out something of a strategy and started following through. Some of it was very minor steps, and some of it was never going to get completed, if we're honest. Like he was saying about this whole mobilization reform from the top down, bottom up, most people understand that's the golden goose; it'll never fully happen. But at least he said it. At least he was like, "Hey, this is what we're going for." And that's the first time in four years I've been here that that's been done.

Chapter 7: The Search for Clear Strategy



Dmytro Putiata [25:10]

Sorry, it definitely increases your morale because, as Rob Lee mentioned, we felt what was our largest counter-offensive. Of course, I remember myself back then. Frankly speaking, I was doomed and asked myself, "Okay, what are we doing next? What was the strategy? How are we going to win, and what does winning this war mean for Україна?" I just found this answer for myself: that we need to stop the Russians, and of course we cannot talk, at least back then, about bringing occupied territories back. The key idea is we should stop the Russians and make Ukrainians live here and not fail as a nation. Fine, okay, but how to achieve this? That was the biggest question for me. Even though my rank was a sergeant, I'm also a human being, and I am a citizen of this country, and I would ask myself how we're going to achieve this, what we are doing, and what did I have? Absolute silence. And of course, no one is supposed to tell me how we're going to do this, but at least after four years, you expect to see some kind of strategy. But after some period of time, I realized that we have, in a lot of cases, zero strategy in terms of economy, in terms of war in general.



Ryan O'Leary [26:32]

There are probably strategies that are talked about, but again, the biggest thing is the Ukrainian institutions are terrible. We don't have them. Yeah, you have them, but nobody knows how to talk to the public. And then if they do, they're always like, "Oh, we can't because it's part of the war, state secret." But in reality, if somebody just came out and said, "Hey, our goal isn't just to survive; we want to do X, Y, Z," at least that would show, "Hey, this is what we're actually doing." Again, I think Mykhailo Fedorov did an amazing job with that. Whether some of his goals or objectives were realistic, most likely not, but at least he said it. Because at that point, once you say it, you own it. And if you own it, that means people are going to hold you to it. So at least they can say, "Hey, look, if he was still the minister seven months from now and mobilization isn't changed or the recruitment isn't changed, at least we know we can say, 'Hey, what about this that you were going to do?'" And then there's somebody that actually has responsibility. When you put out clear objectives, clear goals, and a clear path forward, you not only own it, but now there's responsibility. So people actually feel that they have someone to go to when it doesn't happen. And Україна is very bad at doing that, both on a military level



Rob Lee [27:44]

and on a political level with institutions. So I think one of the things that identifies as kind of an issue, after the summer offensive, is that in Україна, you'd hear things about tactics or operations, but not at the strategic level. It was below that, where we're like, "Okay, we're going to try to do this or this." And it's like, "Okay, but what is the strategy?" So, for example, the Курськ Operation. The Курськ operation, the initial execution was very good. It didn't last too long. But again, it came back to, "Okay, how does Курськ fit into a broader strategy?" And that was never clear to me, whereas it was an effective operation at the operational level. But then of course, the strategy is, maybe it's okay, it's going to be a limited operation to get POWs so you can trade back people, or to force Росія to commit resources elsewhere on the border away from the Донецька область. Okay. But the overall strategy is a small part of it. It seemed to me it took over the strategic thinking, where it's like, "Okay, now Курськ is everything," because we've made it a big political thing. It's embarrassing to Vladimir Putin. But is that actually a theory of success? And to me, it was never clear what it was. And so I think, when I was hearing about Mykhailo Fedorov the first time, he came up with a strategy in 2024. And

Rob Lee (continued)

he was already kind of circling this inside the government. And it was already, you can point out issues with it, but he had a coherent strategy for the war, saying, "Here is what we need to do, here are the steps to get there, here's the ultimate objective," right? It was a realistic objective. And when he came in, I think it was quite useful to bring this in, because again, for us in the United States, we always have some kind of national security strategy. We have a—the DOD has its own, I forgot what it was, a defense strategy, I forget, I should know better. We do a quadrennial review every four years as well. There are issues with all these documents. Anytime the documents come out, they get attacked and people pick at the words and so on. But it becomes a thing where the senior government levels are laying out intent, saying, "Here's how we see the world, here's how we see defense." And everyone below that says, "Okay, here's where I fit into this strategy." If you don't have a strategy, then units are doing things, but what we are building to is unclear. Mykhailo Fedorov, I mean, this year he mentioned he wanted to get the Russian casualty number to 50,000. I personally didn't think that was the best kind of figure. First off, because I'm not sure you can achieve it. Second, I think the attrition ratio is more important in some respects. But again, it was, "Okay, we were going to try to increase the number of Russian casualties. This is how we see some theory of victory, essentially." Of course, you have the deep strike campaign, middle strike campaign, increasing problems for Russian logistics, increasing costs. And this is kind of back to the theory of victory of, "Okay, we make the war unstable for Pociya to some extent, while denying them the ability to take more territory." And so then you had some kind of strategy, I think, which was useful. It's useful to say, "Okay, does this make sense? Does it not make sense?" But at least it's being voiced. I agree with you, I think it was very good that he had a bigger public messaging campaign because people need to know what's going on. Soldiers at the frontline need to know what's going on. If they don't know, how long is the war going to go on? How do my actions fit within a broader strategy? Those are questions that are not good to have. It should have some kind of answer, right? So I think all those things were positive. I agree, I think people are making a black-and-white issue where everything that succeeded is because of him. And it's like, well, I think he did good things. He's had a hand in middle strike, a hand in drones, a hand in a lot of these things. It's the result of the success of a lot of people, right?

Chapter 8: The New Leadership and Public Relations



Dmytro Putiata [31:23]

First of all, servicemen, yes, and even of that General Staff that all of us don't like.



Ryan O'Leary [31:31]

But I think the biggest issue we're going to have going forward, or Україна's going to have, is Khmara. I've worked with people under him before—great at strategy, great at operational, great at asymmetrical warfare. But the problem is, he's coming from an operational group, Служба безпеки України. They're not public; they don't do public affairs. They have one or two public affairs guys for whatever 20,000 of them. But that's what I mean—they're not good at public outreach. And for him to be a career Служба безпеки України guy, he's going to struggle when it comes to addressing the public, not so much addressing our allies behind the scenes. But it's always better when, again, somebody like Mykhailo Fedorov says publicly, "This is what we're doing," because even though the public's always going to get one side of it, and then behind the scenes you're going to have it for the Western allies, then your Western allies can also go to their own people and say, "Hey, yeah, this is what they're doing." And I think Khmara is going to be good. Khmara will be good at probably fixing some of the issues, but he's

Ryan O'Leary (continued)

going to be really bad at communicating what the issues are that he's fixing, how he's fixing them, and what the path forward is. I don't know if the Minister of Internal Affairs is going to be any better at it. I hope they hire a public affairs person who knows what they're doing, otherwise they're going to struggle. I mean struggle not really so much—they might do good work behind the scenes, but they're going to struggle with public perception, they're going to struggle with public trust, and then six months from now we'll have another Ministry of Defense because Volodymyr Zelenskyy is tired of the public protests and people getting angry about things not being done. Because if it's not communicated what's being done, people get upset.



Rob Lee [33:17]

I think—I tweeted about this the other day—but Khmara is very well respected. Career Alpha officer, career Special Operations officer. Keep in mind, Служба безпеки України is not a military unit. So, his background is not going through Company Command, Battalion Command, and so on. It is a very specialized counter-terrorism unit, a domestic counter-terrorism unit, that has now branched out into a variety of things because of the war. It's maybe one of the most innovative units in Україна. It did Operation Spiderweb. They're always near the top in FPV hits. They've gone very heavily into drones at the tactical level, operational, and strategic level. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy mentioned yesterday he wants him kind of overseeing Deep Strike. I'm not sure that's really what the Minister of Defense should be doing. I think all I've heard is good things about him, that he's a trustworthy person, which is important, but also he's very, very competent. But the question is, what background do you need to be a successful minister?

Chapter 9: The Battle for Public Perception



Dmytro Putiata [34:12]

Absolutely.



Ryan O'Leary [34:13]

I think he'll have procurement experience and stuff like that because Служба безпеки України runs their own setup compared to your General Staff or Ministry of Defense. But yeah, I think when it comes to fixing some of the issues, he'll be good at some and he's not going to be good at others. Mobilization—look, Служба безпеки України doesn't mobilize people typically. They help with mobilization, but Служба безпеки України, especially the Alpha office, is all voluntary. It's a very select few that make it even through selection. I think he's going to struggle with a lot of the more mainstream military issues and how to change that. But I think a lot of it will be who his advisors are. And again, I think his biggest hurdle is going to be public—how can he change public perception back into, "Hey, Mykhailo Fedorov's gone, but look, we're still going to continue increasing our effectiveness, fixing and reforming our mobilization, and reforming procurement." I think he can do a lot of it, but I think his biggest issue is going to be the public perception. That's going to be the biggest issue, whether he lasts six months or one month. Even if he ends up being the permanent one, that will be his biggest issue. I think the same with the Minister of Internal Affairs, because neither one of them is really a public-facing person. I don't know if there's really a good fit for an MOD that's public-facing right now.



Dmytro Putiata [35:35]

Well, to be honest, first of all, everyone will compare Khmara with Mykhailo Fedorov. And another thing is that, from my perspective, I think that Khmara has this problem—which is not a problem—that he is a soldier from the bottom of his heart, and being in charge of the MOD, frankly speaking, is a little bit different. And if you don't mind, I'll come back to the topic about 50,000 per month. From my perspective, when I first heard it back then, I was a serviceman. It was definitely a populist statement to be honest, because it was also a question for me: okay, to kill more Russians sounds good, sounds great, no one will doubt that, but what if we pay more attention to the topic of how we secure our forces? Because sometimes, of course, you need to destroy your enemy at different depths and different levels—absolutely true—but we still have a lot of issues for years where our maneuver brigades, who are responsible for the front and seem like they're responsible for everything, don't even have the needed support right now from other units and even from the Army Corps, because it's quite hard for them to fight under the command to which they would be detached. And for me, it's always a mix of whether you need to destroy more enemies or secure your forces. Because, okay, we kill five Russians, but two Ukrainians are also being killed. Is it good for us? I don't think so. Or wounded—I mean, if you lost your eye, leg, whatever, you're out of the military. So it's bad that people do not ask and think about that, it seems, but it's good to make this kind of statement that we will destroy as much as possible. Yeah, right, but also another question: how to achieve that? What if your enemy is not advancing in some areas? For example, the last year I spent there was in Лиман. The 63rd Army Corps literally stopped there at once, and the Russians were not capable of moving forward. So it was on a regular basis that we saw, with a couple of drones across the front line, no one was moving there. So what to do in this case? Of course, they advanced in some areas because they also limited their resources, like the Олександрія, Гуляйполе, and kind of Курськ directions, but the rest of the front line is kind of dead. So no one told me how to achieve that and what to do next.

Chapter 10: The Debate Over Attrition Strategies



Ryan O'Leary [38:20]

I've been pretty vocal about anti-50,000 a month. The biggest thing also people tend to forget is we're limited on manpower. So if we're allocating all of these drone teams to kill 50,000 Russians a month, that means we're taking away the allocation ability for them to do mid-strike, mid-strike being 20 to 100 kilometers where your drone logistics are, where your assembly plants are, everything like that. So when we're doing the 50,000 a month, it sounds good on paper until you realize that we're focusing a majority of our assets into doing this, and it doesn't do much when your enemy has whatever 2 million reserves that they haven't even called up yet. And I think we put too much emphasis on it, and we didn't really stop a lot of the Russian progress. I think we could have handled it better by going after logistics, going more in-depth. A majority of our strikes for the first four months of this year was within one kilometer of the zero line. Why are we killing your enemy at the zero line? It's not a strategy any military ever does. The goal is to kill them before they get to your troops, not while their troops are engaging them. So I think we should have put more emphasis on preventing them from even getting close to us, especially in wintertime. August, September, October, when it started getting cold, this was the coldest winter on record. I would much rather we make them walk 20 kilometers to zero versus them being able to drive five kilometers and then they get hit at one kilometer. Let's tire them out, make them walk, make them freeze



Rob Lee [40:08]

To death before they even get close to the zero. I would say Mykhailo Fedorov did mention 50,000 a month, but he also has been pushing the middle strike. It's not either-or for him; he's done both. Some of this comes back to the strategic thinking, because are you adopting an attritional strategy where you are inflicting too many losses on your side as a way of winning or ending the war? Or are you trying to attack the system, the maneuver warfare type thinking where you say, "Here's the center of gravity of the Russian military, here's the critical vulnerability, we're going to remove this." And that's our way of stopping the actual advance. The problem with the attritional strategy—first off, Pociя has more people. As a country, they are remarkably insensitive to casualties. They're taking massive casualties. There are no massive protests in Pociя happening. Where that breaking point is, I don't know. That is a very difficult thing to say. If Pociя does mobilization in a few months, which people are mentioning, will that lead to political problems? Maybe, maybe not. Maybe Pociя then has 200,000 more people, which they can commit to Чернірів, a new offensive, who knows. Крим is also a good question too, because we're seeing a successful campaign there, where Україна is isolating Крим. There are massive fuel shortages, fuel shortages across Pociя right now. Really big logistics issues in Крим. There's no electricity. It used to be this great vacation place in the summertime; Russians are not vacationing there anymore. This was a really important foreign policy objective of Vladimir Putin's, where of all the things he can say, "Here's what I achieved. I took back Крим." It's a popular thing among Russians, at least it was before the war. Even Alexei Navalny supported it more or less. But now Крим is not a strength. Now Україна reliably can hit pretty much anything they want within Крим. There are no military targets that are particularly safe there. The Black Sea Fleet was removed. There's reporting that the Black Sea headquarters might have been removed, and so on. But the question is, Крим now is a liability. It's much more difficult for Pociя there. But what does that mean? What does this mean in the context of ending the war? Because remember, the 2023 summer offensive, the idea behind it was that if you threaten Крим, Vladimir Putin cares enough about Крим where he might make a deal. He might say, "Okay, what are the terms?" What if no one rises up? What if it's like, "Okay, Крим is not a good situation, but Russians will leave," or whatever? But ultimately, if Russians just put up with it, they get used to it, and there's no pressure on Vladimir Putin. Is it actually a way of ending the war? That part is still not clear to me.

Chapter 11: The Pressure on Russian Infrastructure



Ryan O'Leary [42:49]

I don't think Крим is going to end the war by us blowing up gas stations and whatever else, but there is clearly a difference between a bunch of Russian bodies getting sent back to Pociя versus some person not being able to fill their fuel up. There's been far more Russians complaining about not being able to get gasoline than they have about all the dead going back. So this should be a pretty positive thing that Україна should be able to look at. They don't care that 50,000 Russians are going home in boxes and missing legs every month. But what do they care about? They care about not getting fuel in their vehicles, and they care about having electricity.



Rob Lee [43:34]

Well, I think it's absolutely a positive dynamic. If you look at the war a year ago when Donald Trump took office, it was a point where Donald Trump famously said, "Volodymyr Zelenskyy has no cards, where Pociя has the leverage." And if they did negotiate, Pociя

Rob Lee (continued)

was demanding not just freezing the frontline, but also all the rest of the Донецька область, that you need to make concessions in the war. Now the leverage has changed because Україна has much more leverage if there were negotiations, and who knows what's going to happen. This dynamic is better. And so when negotiations happen, I think from Україна's perspective, it's like, "Okay, we can freeze the frontline. We're not going to make any other concessions beyond that because we don't need to, because you can't advance and we can see the cost you're having in Росія." That dynamic is definitely positive. The point I'm raising is, where is the breaking point for Росія? Where is the point where you do this, you attack this one thing, you remove this from Росія, you cause Vladimir Putin to negotiate? I don't know exactly what that is.



Ryan O'Leary [44:31]

I would say if we're talking Крим or occupied areas, the breaking point is going to be when the Russian military needs to move assets into these areas to keep governance. What I mean by that is, for Крим, the people are only going to put up without having running water, without having electricity, without having fuel for their vehicles only for so long. Maybe they leave. If they leave, then that's fine—everyone leaves, perfect, lower economy for them. They lose all their port access stuff; they basically lose everything. If they leave, then your military units are going to suffer because on both sides, neither one of them can do logistics to where they have three meals a day. Everyone uses local shops, so if everyone leaves Крим, the military is screwed. So I think the breaking point is going to be when Росія either says, "Okay, we have to move a bunch of air assets in to make sure our little civilian guys are happy," the little land occupiers, or if they leave, then what? Then Крим is just a blank open space with nobody there. I think Росія's getting to a point where they're going to have to pick and choose whether they defend Москва, Санкт-Петербург, or they move assets into the occupied areas. I would assume Україна's going to start smacking the crap out of Донецьк and Луганськ as well, and not just Крим. Well, they've been doing that, but I mean on the same levels as Крим. So if they end up having all these issues in Донецьк and Луганськ as well, and everything goes to a halt and there's no more economy, what are you going to do with the 7 million Russians that moved in since 2014? You either protect them, or they leave, or you have governance issues, or when you do mobilization, you mobilize occupied areas first. I don't think there's anyone to mobilize.



Dmytro Putiata [46:17]

Yeah, maybe not. I mean, it will be—I don't want to say easy, but it will be possible for them to mobilize up to 100,000. So then some people who voluntarily signed the contract, and then some small secret mobilizations of Росія, so they will not have enough manpower. But in general, frankly speaking, it will lead literally to nowhere.

Chapter 12: The Impact on Occupied Territories



Ryan O'Leary [46:44]

But I think it's a lot easier for Росія to hide bodies than it is 7 million people getting pissed off.



Rob Lee [46:49]

Well, but they're not even hiding bodies. I mean, people know the count. They're just, some are signing contracts, others are being forced into it, but usually because they have criminal issues or they're like the dregs of society, whatever. The overall Pociя as a country is okay with this to some extent. I'm not saying Russians are happy with the war thing, a lot of them want the war ended, but it's not such an issue that they're going to rise up and—



Ryan O'Leary [47:16]

No, I don't think you'll see them rise up either, but they're going to create governance issues if people keep getting unhappy. You can only keep things in check for so long before shit hits the fan. I don't think they're going to rise up and storm military barracks, but it'll create an issue for Pociя. Obviously, there'll be crime, there'll be other stuff. People have to have some semblance of livelihood, otherwise it'll all just go south. No one's going to live in Крим if they can't provide for their families, if they can't drive to work. It'll get bad if Україна keeps doing it. And again, I think by making the people who moved in to occupy this land uncomfortable every day of their life for the next six months, especially over winter, I think it'll create a problem for Pociя. Is Крим going to rise up and overthrow the government? No, but it's going to create governance issues for the Russians. And either Pociя's going to waste a bunch more money trying to keep the economy afloat in Крим, doing whatever they can to protect stuff, or they say, "Well, we don't care about Крим," and then if it happens in Донецьк and Луганськ, and they say, "Oh, we're going to protect Москва, Санкт-Петербург," they're definitely going to have issues. I don't think, again, it's going to be like them attacking the military, but they're going to run into all sorts of issues trying to keep them afloat economically.



Dmytro Putiata [48:39]

Frankly speaking, I think it's clear that Pociя in general doesn't care about Крим. And they also don't care about, for example, Белгород, which is also under fire. No one cares about each other. All of them live in their small castles under the governor, and they're quite fine with that. But I would like to move forward a little bit and to ask a question. Okay, we are striking Крим. Most of our so-called middle strikes take part in the Southern direction, and the question is, what's next? And I think that's one of the things that divided Mykhailo Fedorov and Oleksandr Syrskyi, because they seem like they have different opinions. Mykhailo Fedorov was okay with continuous striking and striking, but Oleksandr Syrskyi seems like, "Okay, we are striking them, we're decreasing their possibilities, and we need to move forward. We need to have an assault operation." Of course, it's a question: assault operation with whom, how to do that, where, who's responsible, planning, etc. You mentioned today Курськ, and I remember that I fought against the 76th Assault Division, and I remember that we destroyed like dozens of the BMD, 352 vehicles, dozens, maybe more, I don't know, of the paratroopers. There were a lot of bodies, and I said, "Oh, it's quite huge for them." But frankly, all of us know how Курськ ended. We lost approximately 1,000 infantry fighting vehicles, MRAPs, tanks, etc., of armor like M2 Bradley, Stryker, etc., and it's not replaced. We lost a lot of people, and right now, these air assault wings that I mentioned, they are fulfilled with manpower and infantry fighting vehicles with, as far as I remember, 93%. But for example, Україна, 82nd Air Assault Brigade, far from that. 95th, far from that. 80th Air Assault Brigade, far from that. 76th Marine Brigade, far, far from that. Pociя fulfilled the strategic reserves with manpower, with vehicles, with drones, etc. We just need to create two new brigades. Absolutely, two army corps, I think. We have too many colonels. So this is an

Chapter 13: The Cost of Offensive Operations



Rob Lee [51:11]

This is an interesting point if we think back to the strategy of the war: how do we end the war on the best terms for Україна? And I think Mykhailo Fedorov's idea—maybe I'm going to mis-explain this—but was to raise costs, to inflict too many losses on Росія, which is unsustainable, whether they are not recruiting enough people to replace those losses, to not build new units, and so on. Also, to try and cut off logistics for a middle strike, operational strike campaign to make it more difficult for them to fight, and strategically to raise costs, to make Крим a liability, to go after the refineries, to go after the economy, and to make it to a point where Росія cannot—they cannot sustain the war and they need to end the war on some kind of terms. Oleksandr Syrskyi is an offensive-minded general, which is probably what most generals are, most officers are. He obviously led the Kharkiv Offensive, led the Курськ Offensive to successful operations. Some of the criticism directed to him is first, his assault units, the assault regiment corps that's been created—and I think they just reorganized it last week—have come under a lot of criticism recently. Mykhailo Fedorov mentioned this as well, but also it's the idea of when do you need to do assaults, when do you need to counterattack? Because there are times when the conditions are right, when you can counterattack. Maybe Russians take a village, but they're very vulnerable; if you push them back right away, you can retake the territory. One of the issues the last couple of years, there are a lot of counterattacks done where basically it was the default option. If a commander acknowledges he loses a position, he's immediately told to counterattack, retake it. And usually when they lost a position, it's like, "Well, we don't have enough infantry to hold this position, and so we definitely don't have the guys to retake it." And that led to a bunch of issues in the military, including lying, where basically commanders would say, "I'm not going to acknowledge a lost position because either I'll get fired or I'll be told to retake it, and I know we can't do it. And then either I have to refuse that order, in which case I'll be fired, or I just can't execute this, basically." This has been an issue that people have mentioned before, that there's this kind of bias towards counterattacks, sometimes when the conditions are not there. And some of this criticism has been mentioned most specifically to Skala Battalion. So Україна set up a number of assault regiments. These were mostly volunteer units that became assault battalions in 2024. Some of them led the operation in Курськ. So 225th was there, Skala Battalion, 33rd, a few other ones. This became a real point of focus for Oleksandr Syrskyi. It's kind of his own force that he created himself. They are a huge priority for new soldiers. So new mobilized soldiers, these regiments get more soldiers per month than some army corps get. They are a huge priority for vehicles, for M2 Bradley, M1 Abrams, all that kind of equipment. His theory is that most brigades are undermanned, most of them cannot do assault actions. Let's focus resources into making some that can do this, or some that can plug gaps in the frontline. But the reputations are very different, and so each regiment is very different. It all depends on the kind of commander, what kind of standard he set. In particular, Mykhailo Fedorov, he mentioned two, which I'll talk about. He mentioned Skala Battalion. Skala Battalion has, in many areas, not a great reputation in the Ukrainian military. Again, it always depends on who you talk to. Partially because of the idea that they do assaults too often, a lot of the assaults are unsuccessful, they don't necessarily set conditions for success in some cases, or at least that's the kind of reputation. There's been some recent investigations into them about how many of the soldiers that have been mobilized have died non-combat deaths in training. There are allegations that soldiers are beaten or abused in training, and so a variety of issues. The flip side, I would say, is that Skala Battalion, where they go, they hold the frontline. They do plug gaps. They have had success in some offensive operations, and there is some point, I would say, in assault units where these are not going to be friendly places. You need units sometimes that have to breach, that have to be ready to take losses. And sometimes that leads to certain kinds of cultures that are not what we think would be good cultures on the civilian side in terms of discipline and other things. But I think there

Rob Lee (continued)

are different views of that unit. Then you have Code 9.2, the First Assault Regiment. Code 9.2, Mykhailo Fedorov mentioned, is kind of, when he talks about the general assault concept, this is the unit he's talking about. And so they played a big role in the Куп'янськ operation last year. Very small number of infantry. I think we mentioned before on some podcasts, but less than 100 infantry did this operation, went very heavy into use of drones, and basically created localized superiority in drones, which set conditions for moving forward. And the attrition ratio was very, very favorable. And so even though you're doing an offensive operation, even though you typically see a lot of losses, they had a very good attrition ratio in this operation and became this kind of standard that Mykhailo Fedorov wanted to apply elsewhere, like, "This is a doctrine we want to establish." And so you have, again, this kind of mixed area there. But part of the question comes back to, for this war, does Україна need to focus on another offensive, or does Україна need to focus on just making the war unsustainable for Росія? Because if you do another offensive, maybe you take back territory, but you also have risks. Do you have enough manpower to do this? And what if you have a failed offensive where you lose a lot of guys? What does that lead to in mobilization, and so on?

Chapter 14: The Role of Modern Drones



Ryan O'Leary [56:37]

I'm for Oleksandr Syrskyi on this. I don't agree with that man on much, because of the past place I've been where he was the one in charge, Бахмут. But I think now, one could argue that there is a much better chance at doing offensive maneuver warfare than there was in 2023. Drones have shaped this war to the point where you no longer have second-line infantry. Your second line is now the first part of your drone line—so your DJI, bomber drones, whatever small ISR type, sometimes FPV too.



Dmytro Putiata [57:18]

Sorry for interrupting, I think this drone line and the first line, it's all one line.



Ryan O'Leary [57:23]

Yeah, but you have your infantry at zero, then you have your DJI, whatever small ISR, and then behind that you'll have your FPV teams, and on the Україна side, bomber teams. But I think one could argue now that once you get past that zero line, if you get within the enemy's drone line, you can basically do whatever you want as an assault unit because the only thing holding both sides right now are drones. If you get within the other side's drone line and you start clearing each drone position, they can't launch drones at you. Your ground stations are typically directional. So for them to actually be able to hit you with drones, they're gonna have to rotate their stuff, or they're gonna have to say, screw it, go back to goggles. So I think Oleksandr Syrskyi is right that there's opportunities for assaults. I don't think he and I are gonna be on the same wavelength or have the same way to get to that point. I don't think Україна has found a medium on what we need to do to shape the battlefield and how we deny it. Because the biggest thing right now is, if we smack every enemy drone team, if we keep degrading and destroying their logistics at 100 kilometers deep—going back to what you first said, we're not seeing this at the zero line yet, and you're not gonna see that for months, number one—but number two, we can hit vehicles all day long, they'll just truck them in on foot, or they'll use ATVs, dirt bikes, whatever. So the biggest thing we should be

Ryan O'Leary (continued)

doing is area denial. My personal thought process is every tree line that's 15 to 20 kilometers deep, mine the shit out of it. Not like 10, 20, or 30, but 1,000 mines. At 15 kilometers deep, if my front line is here and I know there's a tree line here, I'm gonna put 1,000 land mines in that tree line. Simply because drone teams are logistics intensive. If you need to bring 20 drones in every three days, you have 20 drones, 20 batteries, and 20 munitions. It's not like one person can resupply a drone team; it takes three to four. And then if you use all the drones, you've got to get them again. Nobody's walking through open fields; they're using tree lines. Every tree line shapes the battlefield properly.

Chapter 15: The Window for Tactical Adaptation



Dmytro Putiata [59:48]

You definitely mentioned a lot of things.



Ryan O'Leary [59:50]

I've been wanting to do assault. In 2026, you could see a clear definition of where there's opportunity to exploit; it's just getting to that stage to where we can move forward. I'm pretty sure we went over all the same things in the first podcast.



Dmytro Putiata [1:00:05]

How to bring maneuver back requires a huge report. And it might be a series of a couple of podcasts, but you mentioned a couple of things I would like to add.



Ryan O'Leary [1:00:15]

That is the only thing I agree with Oleksandr Syrskyi on, by the way.



Dmytro Putiata [1:00:17]

Short remarks.



Ryan O'Leary [1:00:18]

It's a good thing because, okay, we strike an operation, that's fine, great, but what's next? We have to shape, we have to do something with it. You need to use this opportunity because they will adapt, they will jam, they will intercept, and then they will do awesome. I think there's a short window that we can take. By February or March of 2027, what we're doing now obviously is not gonna work. It's gonna get harder, it's gonna get more difficult. So we do have, like Oleksandr Syrskyi is right, we have a short window. We've got to do something if we're gonna do it. If we're not gonna do it, that's fine. Plan out the next six to 12 months and let's get that strategy moving. If we're gonna do something, let's do it, preferably not in Запоріжжя.



Dmytro Putiata [1:00:56]

Rob Lee, you mentioned Бакхмыт and you mentioned a big amount of lies. Well, it's definitely from both sides, but if you talk about the Ukrainian one, I'm 100% sure that this kind of lie started when the Бакхмыт campaign was going. And it's not because of Oleksandr Syrskyi, to be honest. It became a very political issue. After that, somehow Ukrainians started being very vulnerable and sensitive to this news that we are losing some village like Порядківка with five residents who live there. Frankly speaking, since the beginning of the war, I told myself, "Okay, dude, I don't care about this village, this city, or anything." I'm thinking about this from the perspective of whether it's suitable for defense, whether we have hills or not. I want to, as I said today, secure. I want to have the possibility where my maneuver brigades are capable of advancing and defending, not dying on a regular basis in attempts to take some position. Okay, we're losing the line. Fine, but you need to secure the army, secure your people. They need to stay alive. It sounds maybe funny during the war, but as long as possible to be able to do something in the future. You don't need to retake every position you lost or every village or city. But Ukrainians became so sensitive to this question. It wasn't like that because during the summer of 2022, we almost lost the Луганськ area and no one was crying on social media. We lost it, and the thing is that you mentioned drone assault units. The first time that we said something like that was in 2023 when Vadym Sukharevskyi created this concept. Frankly speaking, back then for me, it was more like a real drone assault unit, rather than what we have right now with Code 9.2 or some other units. Because if you kill most of your enemy with drones, does this mean that you have a drone assault unit and then you assault? I don't think so. You just kill as much as possible with drones and then your infantry goes and clears the trenches, but the question is, does it mean that you have a drone assault unit?

Chapter 16: The Reality of Drone Assaults



Ryan O'Leary [1:03:23]

No, I don't think so. I think there's a big difference. I was part of the Vadym Sukharevskyi thing in 2023. A lot of our Chosen Company videos were part of that experiment as well. A lot of people think they just used a bunch of drones, hit the positions, and then we assaulted. In reality, when we were moving forward, there's always like one DJI drone following every four guys or every vehicle. So if we had three vehicles on a mission, we had three DJIs following. Once you get out of the vehicle, the DJI follows that team. And then we also had FPVs or other DJIs to drop grenades. We would plan out literally what position to hit and how to hit it with the drone teams. And so we planned everything extremely drone-heavy. It looked like we did a lot of the work; we shot a lot of people. Actually, prepping the area and everything was all drones. Our call for fires, we used drone FPVs for that. We used FPVs for everything, like DJI drones for dropping grenades. I think drone assaults in 2023, what we were doing, were way more advanced than what you currently see, to be honest. I've been hoping Vadym Sukharevskyi needs to go somewhere and just sit down with Code 9.2 or whoever and say, "Hey look, here's how we did it, adjust it to modern drones, and then go for it." Because there's been a huge thing lacking on it.



Rob Lee [1:04:53]

Drone assault is still just doing offensive operations and incorporating drones. You bring in drones, you figure out how drones can augment what we already have, and how they can enable certain things. Because there's been this, and I agree with you, I think the

Rob Lee (continued)

prospects for offensive operations are better now than they were before. I think the missile strike campaign, the ability to isolate parts of the front line, is far improved, far better than it was a year ago. Before, if you tried to concentrate in one direction, you could do this. There are possibilities for success. We saw them in the Гуляйполе direction and elsewhere. But if you can isolate an objective for logistics, make it difficult for resupply, and make it difficult for reinforcements, then you can achieve more. You can actually achieve more. I went back in February. I met a bunch of units that did the little offensive operation northeast of Гуляйполе, and I talked to a bunch of units there. Actually, Skala Battalion is a decent example. They achieved a small breach where they got to Тернове, and it was maybe 70 kilometers past the front line. I forget the number; every unit, because of the gray zone, will sometimes give you pretty inflated numbers, like, "Oh, we breached 20 kilometers." Well, the Russians didn't really hold all of that area, but okay. But they did achieve a breach. They achieved it with ATVs, light vehicles, also BMPs, and they got into Тернове. They reached where the FPV teams were, and they were getting into firefights with these teams. The problem was that there was no one to exploit it. They achieved the breach. If they could have pulled the brigades near them and said, "Okay, follow behind them and just exploit this, just keep driving, create chaos behind the Russian lines," it was absolutely possible. The Russian Telegram channels were absolutely just like—I'm not gonna use a bad word like you—but they were actually very, very concerned about what was going on because the Ukrainians really did have a chance to have a localized collapse of the frontline there. That's why I also talk about Skala Battalion. There are a lot of negative things about them, about different treatment and other things. What I would say, though, is if you need a unit to breach part of the frontline before you can exploit elsewhere, this is a unit that's willing to do it. They'll take casualties. You do need to have a unit that's willing to take casualties to achieve a breach like this, and ultimately they were able to do this. In that operation, what basically happened is that they were able to locate all the Russian drone positions and they suppressed them with BM-21s. It was nothing complex. It was just, "Okay, we know the tree lines where they're gonna be." As you said, if you spend time doing your proper reconnaissance, you try and mine the routes so the FPV teams have fewer FPVs on position, fewer antennas, and so on, so they can't rotate off them. Then when you do the operation itself, you suppress artillery, BM-21s, bomber drones, FPVs, whatever. Drones can enable offensive operations just as they make them difficult, too. Again, it's not just the problem; it's part of the solution. The Russians identified this last year as well. Rubikon and their developments are part of this idea of, "We have to overcome Ukrainian drone teams with our own drone teams." It didn't ultimately succeed, but the concept behind it made sense. I also think we saw what happened, to be honest, with Гуляйполе. Russian lines are not that strong. There is the initial line infantry, but these infantry are not there to defend; they're there to keep moving forward. So it's like a waypoint as they move forward; it's not like a dug-in defense. It's not like they have sectors of fire and that kind of stuff. Also, they don't really care about the infantry too much, so these guys are not that well-trained and don't have many heavy AT weapons. It's really the assumption that Україна lacks the forces to do an offensive operation and that Russia has enough Mavic, FPVs, and Molniya to make anything too difficult. If you can suppress them, if you drive to them very quickly, five to seven kilometers from the frontline, these guys could run away, and then there's nothing dedicated behind that. So you can really create chaos. That's what we saw, I think, in Гуляйполе. Again, I really do think that there was a missed opportunity in January and early February. I think Україна could have really created a small collapse of the frontline of the Russians in that direction. But my view is this was a command and control issue where every regiment was doing their own thing. You needed someone in charge of them, and right when you had this breach by one of the units, that commander should have grabbed a different brigade and said, "Okay, stop what you're doing. Follow behind these guys and just keep exploiting and see where you can go." But it also comes back to, what was the objective of that operation? It's not clear to me there was a very clear objective. And so—

Chapter 17: The Definition of Strategic Objectives



Ryan O'Leary [1:09:27]

They probably didn't think they were gonna get that far, honestly. I don't think anyone was planning to breach five, seven, or eight kilometers deep. On the Ukrainian side, it's probably still, "Hey, let's get to the zero, re-grab it, then move whatever kilometer deep." I don't think anyone on the Ukrainian side is really saying, "Hey, let's plan for a tactical depth maneuver 10 kilometers deep on the Russian side. We get to this area and then we halt." Honestly, if they had gotten seven kilometers in and nobody messed with them, they would have kept going probably. They don't ever really clearly define their objectives on assaults.



Rob Lee [1:10:04]

Well, I do think the 3rd Corps is trying to take that salient back right now. I think that is one of the objectives we're seeing. There's not too much information out there, but there's been geolocated footage that shows the Ukrainian units have advanced in that direction. There's a salient north of Лиман. My view, based on just the open-source information, is they're trying to probably cut off that salient, which makes entire sense to me. But again, it all comes back to: what is the strategy? What is your operational purpose? What is the intent all the way down? You have to know, if it's nested where you're doing the task level, how does it fit in with the operational and strategic levels? That all has to be clear. If it's not clear, then you have units doing different things, and they might be beneficial, but they're not necessarily working efficiently toward one purpose.



Dmytro Putiata [1:10:53]

We can definitely continue discussing this, bringing maneuver back, but I don't want to have this for our podcast because we agreed to discuss what Mykhailo Fedorov mentioned. As I said, this topic requires a separate podcast and a couple of researchers because I can also add a lot of things, but I will try to moderate this right now. No, you're good.



Ryan O'Leary [1:11:19]

All right, one last quick thing. I will say Skala Battalion is a perfect example of having extremely bad public affairs as well. When I talk about public affairs issues and how to approach the public in Україна, and how institutions and the military are not the best at it, Skala Battalion is a perfect example. They don't ever get out in front of things when they're happening. They wait, or if they do get out in front of it, it's always, "That's Russian propaganda. These guys are traitors." Let's create AI that says we are holding the line. Skala Battalion is a perfect example of how not to operate a military unit for public affairs. I don't know who's in charge of it, but this is one of those things where you need to find somebody like Mykhailo Fedorov who can run your public affairs so you can get in front of the issues before they blow up everywhere on social media, whether it's Western social media, Ukrainian, or Russian, and then obviously fix your issues too.

Chapter 18: The Human Element of Leadership



Rob Lee [1:12:20]

In the Marines, there's often quite a bit of variance between different Marine infantry battalions. It's not because the quality of the Marines is different; it's the quality of just sometimes leadership or certain factors. I don't believe there are bad units, typically. Skala Battalion has tons of guys who are bravely fighting every day, holding the front line, and have done really tremendous work. It's important when you talk about a unit to say, "Okay, they have some reputational issues at different times." It's important to keep in mind, look, Skala Battalion has done a very important job holding the Pekrov's direction for most of the winter. They've reinforced lots of parts of the front line. They do hold the front line; they're not running away. My view is never gonna be black and white. I think there is some gray area here, but it's important to keep in mind these guys, a lot of them are doing a great job fighting. They've done a tremendous job holding the front line. By no means, when we talk about some of these issues, should we say that this is, you know, reflex proletariat?



Ryan O'Leary [1:13:21]

A lot of it is public affairs, though. If they would approach the public affairs side of it better, maybe the Ukrainians or whoever wouldn't be saying the unit is bad. Look, the unit has been around for a while. Are they a bad unit? No. They're holding ground, they're taking ground. People should be aware, especially Ukrainian society—and this is probably something that the General Staff and the MoD did a bad job on—you need to be aware that if you're an assault regiment like 1231 and your whole deal is to assault, your casualty ratio is going to be much higher than if you're defending a position. The minute you step across the zero line, it's either go or get fucked up all the way back. There are only two options, even in 2023.



Rob Lee [1:14:07]

And this is part of the issue, I think, also. It's not that the assault regiments are bad. It depends on how they're employed. If they're ordered—for example, if someone loses a village and they're ordered to do a counterattack the next day—if you don't spend time setting conditions for the assault, it'll probably fail with the drone environment and so on. It takes a lot of time and a lot of effort to do this. If you're ordered to do one the next day, it's probably not gonna succeed. Is it the unit's fault if they're ordered to do this? Not necessarily, in my opinion. Again, my view on most of these things—we talk about Mykhailo Fedorov, we talk about Oleksandr Syrskyi, and everyone else—is that it's not a black-and-white issue. You can say positive things in one direction and negative things in another direction, but there's not a black-and-white answer on many of these things. There are always good and bad things we can say. Being in command in a war is incredibly difficult; I don't think there is an easy way of doing it. I saw my war at the platoon level and company level, which is much simpler than it is at the high level.

Chapter 19: The Realities of Regiment Management



Dmytro Putiata [1:15:05]

That is a very nice take, that you saw the war from your perspective. Being a company commander, or from my side being a surgeon—because I did much more than being a surgeon—but at the same time, I realized, because before the full-scale invasion I started the war with pro-Russian separatists, and of course I had more emotions and more

Dmytro Putiata (continued)

criticism. But when I joined the army, I understood how foolish I was. This usually happens to people joining the army; over the years, they start understanding that it's not as simple as you can imagine, and it is definitely not black and white. But as to scale, I cannot, frankly speaking, be supportive of them. From my perspective, I understand if you have regiments that consist of 10,000, which is the division, and you need to also understand the quality of personnel who served there. It's also another thing that people do not discuss. It's more than 1,000 drug addicts, former drug addicts, and alcoholics. And it's only about some addictions, but there are other issues, let's say, in this way. And if people die during training—if they really die during training because of different things—if you have 10,000, that's the reality. And it's also a question of whether you need to have this kind of regiment with a 10,000 personnel pool, because how do you control everyone if they are spread all around the front line? If you try to look at everyone—every battalion, detachment commander, whatever you call them, and every NCO, company commander—and try to communicate with them, it's literally not doable. So the question is, what was the freaking point of that? If you want to have these people who will be able to retake something or break through, fine, that is understandable. I see no point in doing this if you have airborne assault units, because they are assault units and they did it before with armor, with all the NATO procedures. They just do not talk about this, saying, "Oh, we created a battle management, the battle captain, congrats." Airborne did it years ago because they have been trained by NATO countries. So the thing is that people really do not understand how the system works. Of course, the system is in some cases horrible, and people who are doing these things should be punished and go to jail. Not just fired; you go to jail. It needs to be investigated. But also, the question is, if you allow your army to be built in this way, with absolutely no big idea behind it, the question may be to those who, as you said, deploy those troops in the way they deploy them.



Rob Lee [1:18:02]

It's also another issue, and we can segue into the other discussion we want to get into. Mobilization is a big problem in Україна. It's been a big problem for a long time; the country has not gotten many volunteers since 2023. And when they get volunteers, it's for drone units or so on. People don't want to go into the infantry. They don't want to go to assault units, typically. The creation of assault units—part of this comes back to the issue of mobilization, where you don't have enough willing people who want to be infantrymen to hold the front line. And so the way the assault regiments are resourced, they got a lot of prisoners. So initially they set up Skala battalions. All the prisoner battalions have a different kind of code of conduct, even within the mechanized brigades, where it's like, "Hey, we are going to lead these guys in a different way, it's going to be more draconian." But there's a certain kind of prison rule in the way we lead people. And some of the stories you hear of Skala Battalion and other things, these are stories I heard from Skala battalions that were in mechanized brigades too. And so part of it comes back to: again, the assault regiments are not getting 19-year-old motivated young guys. They're not getting what you had before the war. You're getting older people; they're mobilized. No one wants to be an infantryman in an assault unit at this point in the war, typically.



Ryan O'Leary [1:19:24]

They're still foreigners, yes, on the first assault, and then maybe not. But it comes back to: how do you have guys who are motivated to go into a situation where there's a high likelihood of being killed or wounded? And the way you maintain discipline is sometimes uglier than it would be in an ideal situation. Again, the one thing I would say is my

Ryan O'Leary (continued)

perspective is from the United States military, the United States Marines. Everyone I saw was a volunteer. I went to Afghanistan; everyone volunteered to go. I did back-to-back deployments; everyone volunteered to go again. So you did seven months on a ship, and we knew we were going to go to Marjah, which was the worst place in Afghanistan. Everyone volunteered to do this. All my guys were young, we were all in very, very good physical shape, there were no drug issues. So I went there under ideal conditions. Leading a mobilized military with older people who bring every type of issue from society—from alcoholism to physical issues—is entirely different. And of course, we remember all the Vietnam stories. Vietnam is not known as a high point in United States military command and control. We had issues of fragging; we had all sorts of problems too. We just haven't dealt with that for 50 years, but we have experienced the same problems. And I think there is no perfect solution. I think we should avoid black-and-white approaches to some of these things because it's not easy, it's not simple. And I think it's difficult in general to talk about, always.

Chapter 20: The Path to Institutional Reform



Rob Lee [1:20:54]

But all right.



Ryan O'Leary [1:20:55]

They need to fix their public affairs. Optics is 90% of it.



Rob Lee [1:21:02]

Okay. So the story this week as well: the commander of the 155th Mechanized Brigade, the former commander, is the former chief of staff of Skala Battalion. He went over to the 155th. The 155th has served under Skala Battalion the last six months. So that commander was arrested. Allegedly, he had seven or eight of his subordinates pick up two guys, kidnapped them, and executed them.



Ryan O'Leary [1:21:28]

So this is another story. From my point of view, if the commander did that and then seven or eight guys did that, where is the chain of command in between that, honestly? They should just dissolve the 155th at this point, as there have been issues since the start with it. Take the good guys, put them in a unit that can actually utilize them properly so they get treated properly, and get rid of all the shitheads—lock them up, whatever.



Dmytro Putiata [1:21:54]

Give them shovels.



Ryan O'Leary [1:22:01]

Honestly, if a brigade commander or battalion commander was able to get seven or eight guys away from duty—so these seven or eight guys, they are enlisted. Where is their officer or their company commander? Who is the battalion commander there, too? That's what I mean. There has been a leadership issue all the way down the totem pole here, and this isn't the first time with them. So at this point, just get rid of the unit, move the guys into a unit that has proper command, that already has a foundational level of command, and let them work there, succeed there. Because if a battalion commander—where are the other officers who allowed seven or eight other guys to leave? Where are your company commanders? You just don't know that seven or eight guys...



Rob Lee [1:22:41]

Allegedly, the battalion commander was part of this.



Ryan O'Leary [1:22:42]

I know, but that's what I mean. How do you let seven or eight guys travel four and a half hours, seven hours, whatever, away and nobody knows?



Dmytro Putiata [1:22:52]

That is one of the issues that Mykhailo Fedorov mentioned: that we continue printing new units and we're not even capable of fulfilling them with manpower, with artillery shells, with drones, with officers, with NCOs, with literally anyone. And I remember my latest brigade, which was a new one based on the former mechanized battalion. We didn't have a headquarters, to be honest.



Ryan O'Leary [1:23:22]

That's what I mean. Just get rid of the 155th, take the officers, and move them to other headquarters.



Dmytro Putiata [1:23:24]

That's clear, but...



Ryan O'Leary [1:23:25]

There are positions for everyone.



Dmytro Putiata [1:23:30]

But there is the problem that we do not do this; we expand and expand, and right now we are creating two new unmanned system forces brigades.



Ryan O'Leary [1:23:35]

And four mechanized.



Dmytro Putiata [1:23:46]

And we are taking people from already existing unmanned system forces brigades to those two new ones, and try to guess whether they are the good ones or the bad ones. And how are they supposed to lead the brigade? He is a lieutenant—I am talking about a real guy—and he is really retarded. He was sent from my former brigade to this new one, and he has the responsibility: he will be a chief of staff of a battalion. This is the most disorganized guy I have ever met.



Rob Lee [1:24:15]

We have this. All right, let's go to the next. We started using some locker language too, so it's a full bag.



Ryan O'Leary [1:24:24]

Sorry, all right. It's okay.



Rob Lee [1:24:26]

But anyway, it was a great episode. Glad to have you guys, talk to you guys, and we'll definitely do it again. Perfect. See you guys. [Samuel P.N. Cook] Hello and thank you for listening to another episode of the Україна



Samuel P.N. Cook [1:24:40]

Military History podcast. I hope that you enjoyed this episode today. And if you did, please like, comment, and share wherever you're viewing or listening to this podcast. Whether you're on YouTube, please leave comments, share, and subscribe to our channel. If you're listening to this on the podcast apps, please download and subscribe to us so you get notified of every new episode. When it comes out, it will go straight to your inbox. You can also go to our website and sign up for our email list to be notified of future initiatives of the Ukrainian Military History Institute, future episodes as they come out, and also some events that we run here in Київ for the community. Borderlands Foundation has some community meetups, so if any of those things are interesting to you, please sign up for our email list. And then finally, this is funded by the Borderlands Group. It's a consultancy that I run that helps Ukrainian and foreign companies, military companies, and Ukrainian companies that are trying to grow their business, get feedback

Samuel P.N. Cook (continued)

on their products from frontline units, and develop their products for the battlefield so that they're useful for both Україна but also other countries that want to use their military technology products. So if you'd like to learn more about what we do—whether it's getting in touch with Rob Lee or other members of the podcast to write reports or advise you, whether you're a military or government that wants to understand what's going on in the war in Україна for your own national security, or if you'd like to work as a military technology company inside Україна and learn from and develop your technology here—please go to the Borderlands Group website, leave us a message, and we'll be in touch to see how we can help you learn from and contribute to Україна's victory here in this war.