



Putin's Safe Space: Defeating Russia's Kharkiv Operation Requires Eliminating Russia's Sanctuary

By George Barros
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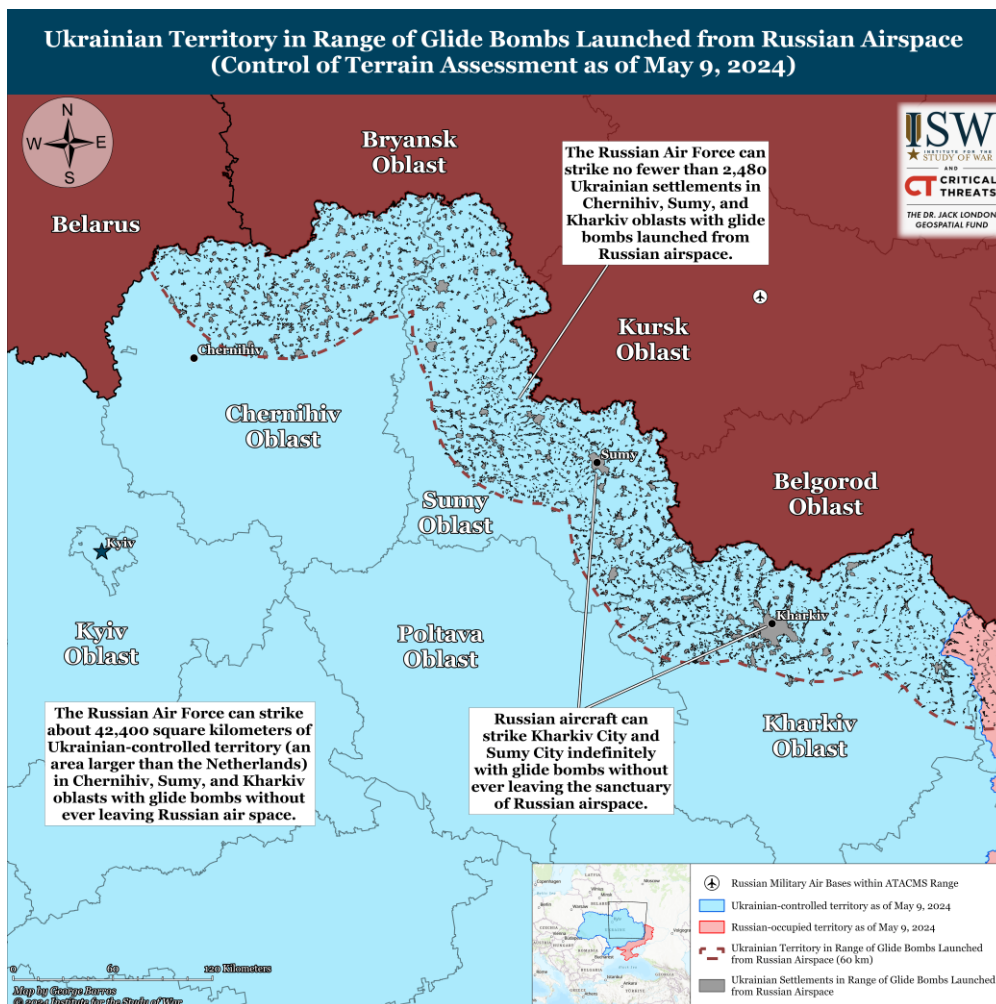
Current US policy prohibiting Ukraine from using US-provided weapons in the territory of the Russian Federation is severely compromising Ukraine's ability to defend itself against the renewed cross-border invasion Russia has recently launched in Kharkiv Oblast. US policy has effectively created a vast sanctuary in which Russia has been able to amass its ground invasion force and from which it is launching glide bombs and other long-range strike systems in support of its renewed invasion. Whatever the merits of this US policy before the Russian assault on Kharkiv Oblast began, it should be modified immediately to reflect the urgent realities of the current situation.

The Russian military began an offensive operation along the Russian-Ukrainian border in northern Kharkiv Oblast on May 10 — an effort that will pose serious challenges to Ukrainian forces over the coming months. The operation seeks to fix Ukrainian forces across the theater and thin them out along the 600-mile frontline to create opportunities, specifically in Donetsk Oblast, among other significant objectives that ISW has warned about at length.[1] Russian forces will likely leverage their tactical foothold in northern Kharkiv Oblast in the coming days to intensify offensive operations and pursue the initial phase of an offensive effort likely intended to push back Ukrainian forces from the border with Belgorod Oblast and advance to within tube artillery range of Kharkiv City.[2] The operation could set conditions for a major offensive operation that seeks to seize Kharkiv City, though Russian forces' current limited efforts do not suggest that Russian forces are immediately pursuing a large-scale sweeping offensive operation to envelop, encircle, or seize Kharkiv City.[3] Russia's operation is still nonetheless dangerous and is already diverting some Ukrainian forces and resources from Donetsk to Kharkiv.[4] Russia's Kharkiv operation will force Ukraine to make difficult prioritization decisions that can generate significant operational effects in favor of Russia in the coming months.

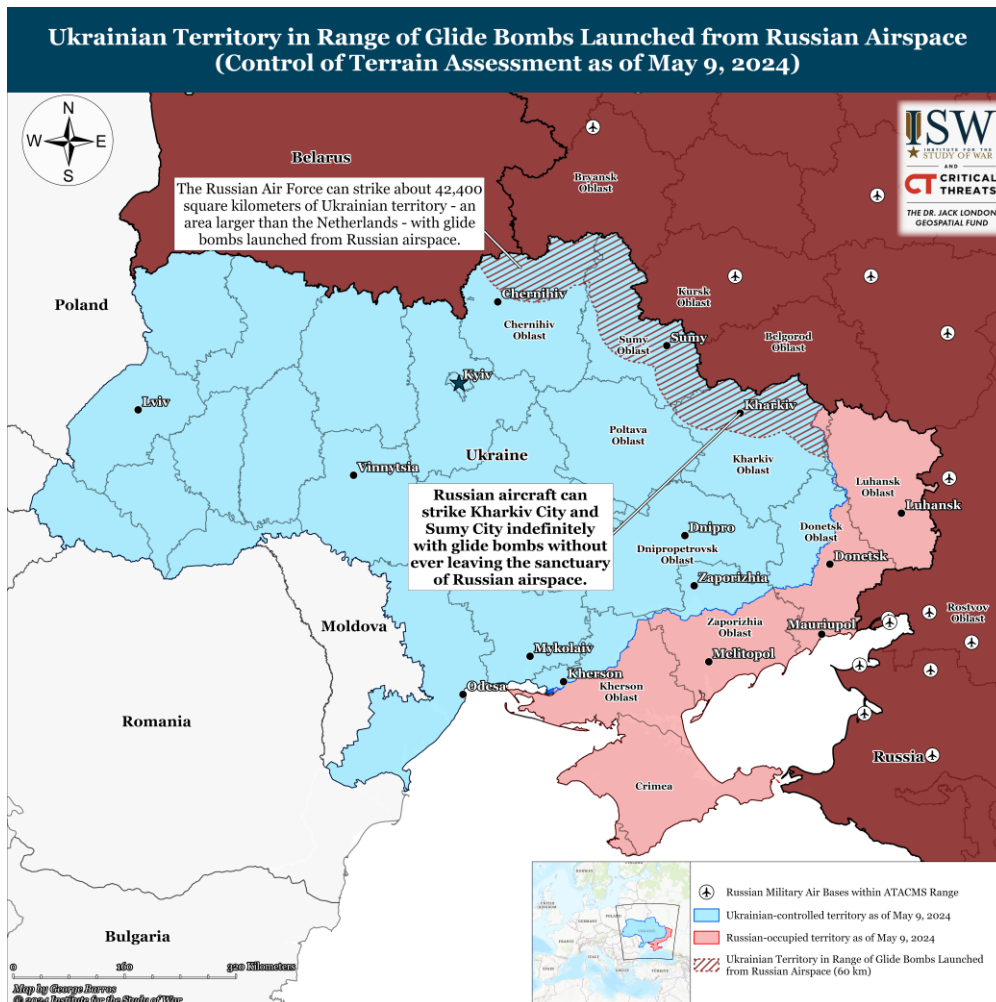
Defeating Russia's operation in Kharkiv Oblast requires defeating Russia's glide bomb threat. Russian forces are using glide bombs launched from Russian airspace to enable Russian ground maneuver in Kharkiv Oblast. The Russian Air Force dropped glide bombs against frontline settlements when Russia began the initial phase of its Kharkiv Operation on May 10 and dropped no fewer than 20 glide bombs against the frontline city of Vovchansk on May 11 alone.[5] Russian forces continued to strike frontline cities in Kharkiv with glide bombs on May 12.[6] Russian forces previously demonstrated the capability to use massed glide bomb strikes to destroy Ukrainian strongpoints to enable tactical maneuver during the battle of Avdiivka in February 2024.[7] The Russian military is replicating this tactic in its new Kharkiv operation.

Russia is leveraging Russian airspace as a sanctuary to strike Kharkiv Oblast. Senior US government officials have issued multiple statements throughout 2023 and 2024 that Ukraine may only use US-provided weapons within Ukrainian territory and airspace, and that the US does not encourage or enable attacks within Russia, very likely also including Russian airspace (although the US prohibition on Ukraine's use of air defense systems around Kharkiv is less clear).[8] Ukraine cannot defend its frontline positions from Russian glide bombs so long as Ukraine cannot intercept Russian aircraft in Russian airspace with US-provided air defense systems. Russia's use of Russian airspace for these attacks underscores the urgent need for the US to provide more long-range air defense assets and to allow the Ukrainians to use them to intercept Russian aircraft in Russian airspace.

Russian aircraft can strike Kharkiv City indefinitely without ever leaving the sanctuary of Russian airspace. Kharkiv City lies 40 kilometers from Russia's international border with Ukraine. Russia's glide bombs have a glide range of 40-60 kilometers.[9] Ukraine's air defense systems do not have the capability to intercept glide bombs once they have been launched from Russian fighter-bombers. The Russian Air Force can therefore strike Kharkiv City without ever entering Ukraine's sovereign airspace. It is absurd to constrain Ukraine's ability to counter Russia's glide bomb threat in Kharkiv at this pivotal moment.



The Russian Air Force can strike wide swaths of Ukraine uninhibited so long as the Russian Air Force continues to leverage Russia's airspace sanctuary. The Russian Air Force can strike no fewer than 869 settlements in Kharkiv Oblast without ever leaving Russian airspace.[10] The Russian Air Force can strike no fewer than 2,480 Ukrainian settlements in Chernihiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv oblasts together without ever leaving Russian airspace.[11] The Russian Air Force can strike about 42,400 square kilometers of Ukrainian-controlled territory in Chernihiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv oblasts without ever leaving Russian air space.



Defeating Russian glide bomb attacks against Kharkiv City requires the interception of Russian aircraft in Belgorod Oblast before they come within striking range of Kharkiv City. The Russian Air Force began to strike Kharkiv City with glide bombs in March 2024.[12] Ukraine has not been able to effectively counter these strikes because Ukraine is running low on its indigenous S-300 air defense systems and lacks sufficient other non-US long-range air defense systems to intercept Russian fighter-bombers before they release their glide bombs.[13] **Ukraine needs more Patriot systems and interceptors, but no number of Patriot systems can protect Kharkiv City from the Russian glide bomb threat so long as the Russian Air Force can continue to use Russian airspace as a sanctuary and safe space.**

Russia also leverages its airspace sanctuary to conduct devastating missile and drone strike attacks against Ukraine. Russia conducts routine large-scale strikes targeting Ukraine employing drones, cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, hypersonic missiles, and other ordinances. Russian strikes have become more effective over time as Russia has incorporated tactical adaptations to overcome Ukrainian air defense capabilities and as Ukraine has run low on interceptors.[14] Russia's airspace sanctuary compounds the challenges in defeating Russian strike packages. Ukraine's air defenders

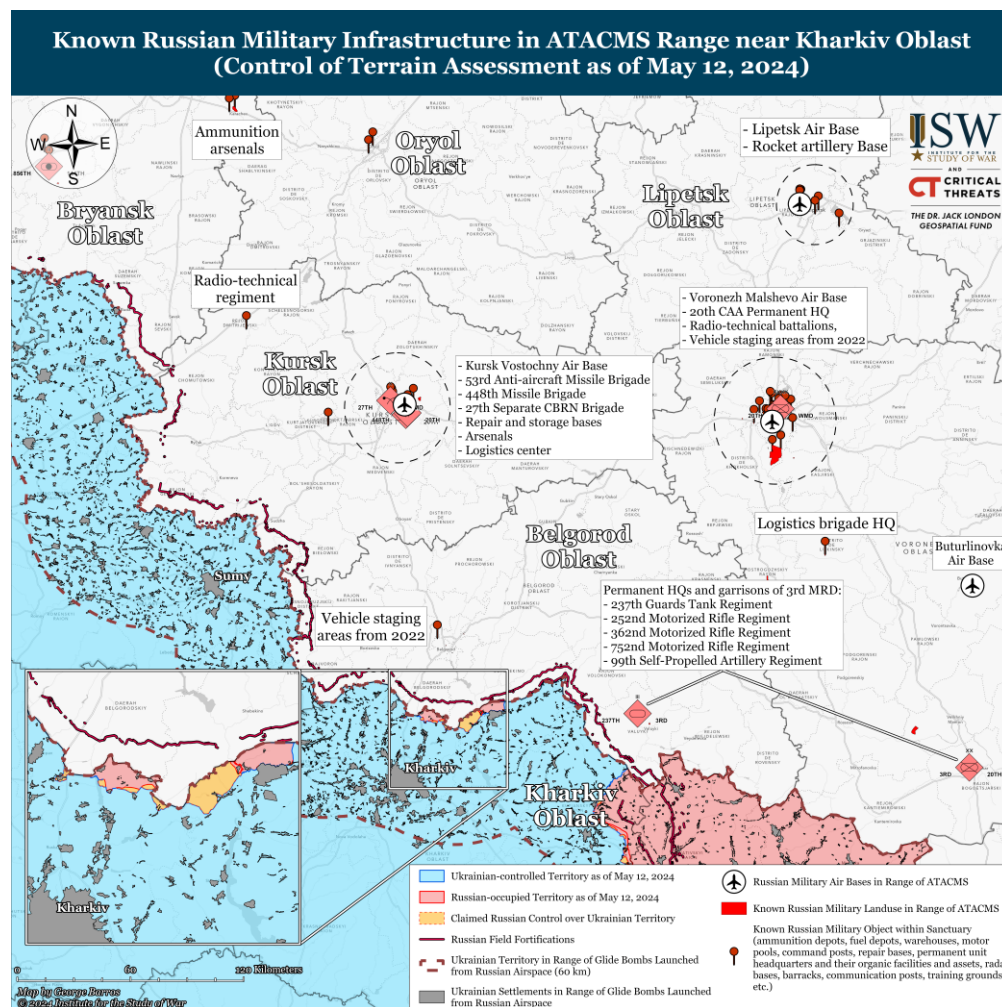
have limited reaction time to intercept Russian projectiles if the projectiles must first enter Ukrainian airspace before they can be interdicted.

The more physical distance and therefore time that Ukraine has to track and intercept Russian missiles and drones, the more effective Ukrainian air defense will be. Israeli and allied forces managed to successfully defeat Iran's unprecedented Russian-style strike package against Israel on April 13 because Israeli and allied forces tracked and intercepted the projectiles as they flew extended distances over Iran, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and did not wait for them to enter Israeli airspace before intercepting them.[15] Ukraine would be able to more effectively defend itself from Russian strikes if Ukraine's air defenders could similarly track and intercept Russian missiles and drones from the source as they approach Ukraine over an extended distance, as opposed to waiting until they cross into Ukrainian airspace. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Major Ilya Yevlash stated on May 10 that Ukrainian authorities in Kharkiv City have very little time to identify and neutralize air threats that originate from the nearby areas across the Russian border, reflecting the challenges posed to Ukraine's air defenders by policies creating sanctuary for Russian combat forces in the Russian Federation.[16]

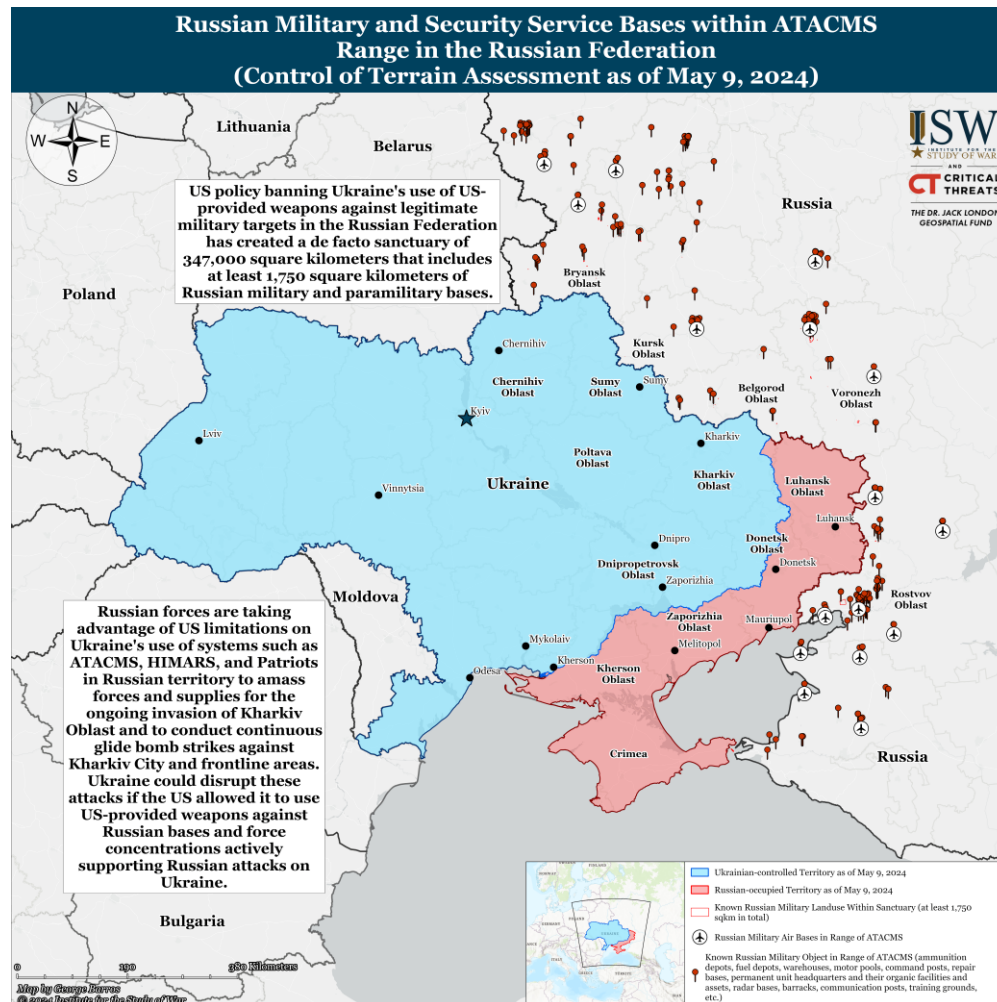
The Russian military is further exploiting Russia's sanctuary space to facilitate ground operations in Kharkiv Oblast.

Russia used its sanctuary to protect and assemble an operationally significant force on the Russian side of Ukraine's northeast border over the past several months. The Russian military has gathered roughly 50,000 personnel in Belgorod, Kursk, and Bryansk oblasts as part of its Northern Grouping of Forces — the operationally significant force now conducting the offensive against Kharkiv Oblast.[17] The vast majority of these forces are not yet committed to battle and are waiting in reserve at staging areas very close to Ukraine's border, very likely outside of the range of Ukrainian tube artillery. Russia will likely commit these forces to battle in the coming weeks and months, forcing Ukraine to redeploy manpower and materiel to Kharkiv Oblast to defend against Russian forces, potentially at the expense of reinforcing other critical parts of the front in Donetsk Oblast.

The Russian military is exploiting its sanctuary space to shield Russian ground forces from Ukrainian attacks before marshaling them into Ukraine. US officials have emphatically stated that Ukraine may not use HIMARS and ATACMS outside of Ukrainian territory.[18] But the frontline in Kharkiv is the international border. Ukraine's most effective rocket artillery systems have the range to strike Russian forces' assembly areas and command posts in Belgorod Oblast but the sanctuary is allowing Russia to freely assemble tens of thousands of forces at the front with minimal risk until Russian troops leave their final line of departure at the international border and enter Ukraine.[19] **The idea that Ukraine must wait until a mass of Russian forces approach and then cross the international border before engaging them is absurd,** especially given Ukraine's asymmetric disadvantages in manpower and materiel relative to Russia. The US can take steps to equalize the battlefield and increase Ukraine's odds of defeating Russia's Kharkiv operation by eliminating its prohibitions on the use of US-provided weapons against Russian forces imminently threatening Ukraine from Russian territory.



The US should allow Ukraine to strike legitimate military targets in Russia's rear with US-provided weapons. Russia's sanctuary shields hundreds of legitimate military targets in rear areas that Ukrainian forces are capable of striking. This sanctuary shields hundreds of known military objects, including ammunition depots, fuel depots, warehouses, motor pools, command posts, repair bases, permanent unit headquarters and their organic facilities and assets, radar bases, barracks, communication posts, at least 15 air bases, and other key military and dual use infrastructure that the Russian military has optimized to project force into Ukraine. The sanctuary protects no fewer than 1,750 square kilometers — an area the size of Houston - of land known to be used by the Russian military and paramilitary security services.^[20] Ukrainian forces likely can significantly disrupt Russian operations at scale provided the elimination of the sanctuary and enough rocket artillery ammunition to strike such legitimate targets.



Removing Russia's sanctuary will degrade Russian logistics by forcing Russia to reconfigure rear support areas and logistics nodes to protect them from Ukrainian strikes. Concealing and protecting rear area assets from adversary reconnaissance and fire is a resource intensive undertaking that requires sacrifices in logistical efficiency and sustainment capability in exchange for greater operational security and force protection. At present, the Russian military does not need to prioritize force protection in rear areas in Russia, which has permitted Russia to optimize its rear areas for logistical efficiency to push forces and materiel into Ukraine at scale. Russia's sanctuary has also allowed Russia to deploy its limited air defense and electronic warfare assets to protect frontline troops in Ukraine, as opposed to arraying such assets inwards to protect rear areas, logistics nodes, and command points. Eliminating Russia's sanctuary would force Russia to make decisions about whether or how to reconfigure its rear areas, deploy protective measures, and reduce its footprint to improve protection at the expense of efficiency, likely degrading Russia's quantitative edge in projecting men and material into Ukraine at scale. So long as Russia's sanctuary exists, the Russian command will not have to worry about such considerations and can rest at ease knowing that Russian forces, logistics, and command points in the rear area sanctuary are categorically safe from Ukraine's most effective rocket artillery.

Reevaluating Russia's sanctuary is not an all or nothing affair. Standing US prohibitions on how Ukrainian forces may use US-provided weapons will not prevent Western weapons from striking Russia. Western states are already beginning to reevaluate Russia's sanctuaries in part or in whole. The United Kingdom (UK) officially eliminated Russia's sanctuary from UK weapons when Foreign Minister David Cameron announced in early May 2024 that London now permits Ukraine to strike Russian territory with UK-provided weapons.^[21] Ukraine has long struck legitimate targets in Russia with any weapons it can and will continue to do so.

The US need not greenlight the use of all US-provided military systems against any target in the Russian Federation and still lift its restrictions enough to allow Ukrainian forces to defend themselves against immediate operational assaults. **Neither Russia nor any other state has the right to view its sovereign territory as inviolable in a war of aggression that it has initiated. Establishing the principle that nuclear-armed states can earn such inviolability through threats of escalation encourages other such potential predators to imagine that they, too, can attack with impunity and demand sanctuary in their own territory. US restrictions on Ukraine's use of US-provided weapons were one thing when the question was of a possible long-range strike into the deep Russian rear. Preventing Ukraine from using all of the resources at its disposal against a renewed cross-border invasion makes no sense.**

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