



Ground Truth Symposium

Operational Briefing on Drone Warfare and Modern Battlefield Lessons

Washington, D.C. · March 25, 2026 · 11:00 am – 3:00 pm · Invitation Only

The Ground Truth Symposium convenes Members of Congress, congressional staff, defense officials, and select industry leaders for an operational briefing on how drone-dominant warfare in Ukraine is reshaping modern combat and what it means for U.S. force design, allied defense, and American national security. Ukrainian front-line leaders and U.S. practitioners will share direct battlefield insight on force protection, training, battlefield adaptation, and the scaling of modern military capabilities.

The objective is to translate frontline experience from Ukraine into practical lessons for U.S. stakeholders responsible for defense strategy, procurement, and force readiness.

Agenda, speakers, and timing remain subject to change.

Panel speakers are military officers from the **429th UAV Brigade "Achilles"**, **Azov**, and the **Lazar Group**. The names of the military officers taking part in the symposium are classified and will not be disclosed.

Opening Remarks and Welcome

Opening: Bill Cole, Peace Through Strength Institute **Keynote Speakers:** Congressman Don Bacon · Senator Richard Blumenthal

Opening remarks will frame the purpose of the symposium and explain why direct frontline insight is essential for informed policy and defense planning. The session will establish why ground truth from the modern battlefield must inform U.S. congressional understanding, procurement decisions, and strategic planning and why the lessons from Ukraine are directly relevant to U.S. national security today.

Keynote — Lito Villanueva

Focus: Establishing the operational context for the day: how modern combat is unfolding and why traditional assumptions no longer apply.

Lito is a U.S. Air Force veteran, engineer, entrepreneur, and recognized expert in unmanned aerial systems. His background includes three deployments to Afghanistan, including service with a Special Missions Unit inside Joint Special Operations Command. Over the past four years in Ukraine, he has worked side by side with Ukrainian counterparts at both the strategic and tactical levels, helping establish joint communications standards and leading a small Ukrainian drone team. As keynote speaker, Lito will establish the operational context for the day — how modern combat is unfolding, what has already changed on the battlefield, and why traditional assumptions about force structure, training, and doctrine no longer apply.

Ground Truth Framing

Speakers: Bill Cole, Alik Kasman

This segment connects battlefield reality in Ukraine to broader strategic implications for U.S. national security. Drawing on the operational lessons of the war, Bill Cole and Alik Kasman will examine why battlefield outcomes matter to American interests, how the pace of adaptation determines outcomes, and why speed and resource alignment are central to changing the course of the conflict. The discussion will emphasize that the technological and doctrinal shifts driving this war are not emerging — they have already arrived, and they are reshaping the balance of advantage in ways that demand a clear-eyed U.S. response.

Panel I — The Battlefield Today: How Combat Actually Feels

Moderator: Lito Villanueva **Speakers:** Ukrainian Armed Forces officers from Azov, the 429th UAV Brigade "Achilles," and the Lazar Group

This panel places the audience inside the modern battlefield as experienced by Ukrainian forces operating today. Frontline commanders will describe what it means to operate under constant drone surveillance, where exposure for even a few minutes can be fatal and movement decisions are shaped entirely by the threat of immediate engagement. Speakers will explain how drones and electronic warfare have become the defining variables of modern combat — shaping not just tactics, but how units move, communicate, make decisions, and survive. The engagement cycles, adaptations, and human realities described in this panel reflect the battlefield that U.S. forces and partners must understand and prepare for.

Panel II — The System Behind the Fight: Air, Drones, and Electronic Warfare

Moderator: Oleg Gorenko **Speakers:** Ukrainian Armed Forces officers from Azov, the 429th UAV Brigade "Achilles," and the Lazar Group

This session examines the integrated system behind modern drone warfare — how detection, targeting, strike, and electronic countermeasures operate together as a continuous loop rather than separate functions. Speakers will explain how drone threats have evolved from individual platforms into layered, adaptive systems that demand equally integrated defensive responses. The discussion will address the practical challenges of defending against high volumes of fast, low-cost, and continuously evolving drone threats at scale, including lessons on layered defense, interception economics, and the resilience requirements that determine whether defensive systems can sustain under sustained attack.

Guest Speaker — Ilya Sekirin: Drone Warfare and the Future of War

Focus: How drone warfare is reshaping combat and what it takes to win and end the war.

Drawing on his experience as a frontline drone operator, military adviser, and author of *Rise of the Machines: Drone Warfare in the Russia–Ukraine War*, Ilya Sekirin will examine how drones have moved from a supporting capability to a central instrument of modern warfare. He will explain how unmanned systems are reshaping the battlefield, altering the balance between offense and defense, and forcing militaries to rethink doctrine, force structure, procurement, and deterrence. His remarks will address what it takes — operationally, industrially, and strategically — to win and bring the war to an end, and why these lessons matter not only for Ukraine but for the United States and its partners.

Break

Networking and transition break.

Panel III — Speed, Scale, and Adaptation: Why This War Is Different

Moderator: Mike Kofman **Speakers:** Ukrainian Armed Forces officers from Azov, the Lazar Group, and the 429th UAV Brigade "Achilles," with participation from Lito Villanueva and Ilya Sekirin

This panel examines what separates effective forces from those that fall behind: the ability to adapt continuously, learn rapidly from battlefield results, and scale solutions before the adversary can counter them. Speakers will discuss how Ukrainian units have built feedback loops between frontline operators and production, how tactics evolve in days rather than months, and what organizational and industrial conditions enable this pace of adaptation. The discussion will also address the barriers that prevent successful models from scaling and what must change to replicate battlefield successes at the speed and volume modern warfare demands.

Panel IV — What This Means Now: Ukraine, the United States, and the Expansion of the Battlefield

Moderator: Bill Cole **Speakers:** Ukrainian Armed Forces officers from the Lazar Group and the 429th UAV Brigade "Achilles," with participation from Lito Villanueva and Ilya Sekirin

This panel draws direct connections between what is happening on the battlefield today and the immediate decisions facing U.S. policymakers. Speakers will address what it means for the United States when a peer adversary is being tested, degraded, and contested at scale in real time and what the results reveal about force

structure, procurement, and deterrence requirements. The discussion will cover resource allocation priorities, the urgency of scaling drone capabilities, the expanding battlefield environment, and emerging risks that extend beyond Ukraine to broader global security implications.

Fireside Conversation – Industry, Capital, and the Speed of Modern War

Moderator: Bill Cole **Speakers:** Bill Cronenberg, Perry Boyle, and industry participants

This fireside conversation will explore the industrial and financial dimension of modern warfare — what it takes to produce, sustain, and scale drone capabilities at the pace the battlefield demands. Speakers will examine production capacity constraints, supply chain realities, and the capital and investment pathways needed to bridge the gap between operational need and industrial output. The discussion will address how U.S. and allied industry must align with battlefield requirements and what stands in the way of scaling the capabilities that are already proving decisive.

Closing Synthesis – What Must Change Now

Speakers: Bill Cole and Alik Kasman

The symposium will conclude with a direct synthesis of the day's major lessons for U.S. lawmakers, staff, defense leaders, and industry. Rather than a general summary, this closing segment will focus on what must change, specifically and immediately, in U.S. doctrine, procurement, training, force structure, and security assistance. Drawing on the full day's operational insight, the closing will translate frontline reality into a clear set of implications for the decisions that U.S. policymakers and defense leaders face now.

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