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“Putin's Regime: Alternative Futures?”

Context:

Russia's war on Ukraine has placed a spotlight on President Putin, notions of Putinism and how power is actually exercised in Russia. Putin's televised addresses to Russia on 22 February and 24 February highlighted the role of ideology and Putin's own particular understanding of Russia's history and its relevance to Russian foreign and security policy. The extraordinary hostility, anger and sheer venom on display in Putin's speeches spoke to paranoia, isolation and unpredictability.

There are many imponderables, not least the impact of “economic warfare” on Russia as sanctions have never been used at this scale and on an economy that is as integrated into global supply chains and banking system. Over time, the state is likely to press further on civil society, and public opinion on elite behavior may change. In other conflicts (Afghanistan, Chechnya), for example the power of the ‘Committee of Soldiers and Mothers’ had a legitimacy that could not be ignored – it would be a definite signal if this time the Kremlin chose to crack down on it.

But, along with imponderables, there are also some certainties. First, Russian propaganda and soft power instruments are wholly delegitimized outside of Russia, particularly in the ‘political West’. Second, for Putin and his inner circle (“gerontocracy”) Ukraine represents an all-or-nothing proposition: only “victory” over Kyiv and Ukraine satisfies their self-image and prevents regime change in Moscow and system change in Russia.

What might alternative Russian futures and governing paradigms look like? How might the crucible of invasion of Ukraine generate alternative futures? This summary identified both Russia as “Brezhnev 2.0” and “Russian DPRK”. Both scenarios do not characterize the very present in Russia but aspects of them can be empirically evidenced today. If we extrapolate such evidence forward, what are the likely characteristics of such models, the assumptions that underpin them, and the indicators or drivers that suggest this is the trend line?

“Brezhnev 2.0”

This scenario is predicated on the impossibility of a “forgive and forget” political settlement in Ukraine. Russia remains in political and cultural isolation with economic trade (mainly gas and oil) only occurring where absolutely necessary. A regime tilting even more to the “security bloc” is consolidated in Russia. The military and *siloviki* are funded and the regime is secure. Soft neo-Stalinist societal repression incubates a passive and apathetic public – there is no political relaxation or “thaw” this side of the horizon. Russia may have a rhetorically confrontational foreign policy but domestic public opinion and a weak economy limit aggressive action. The current pattern of foreign adventures is less easily enabled (physical access) and less affordable. The leadership, which may or may not include Putin, may be more stable, predictable, and pragmatic, but is likely to continue to regard the West as hostile and thus continue political operations it hopes will divide and distract it. In this context, Russia might be able to gradually reduce the costs of the occupation of Ukraine and address the worst aspects of crisis and confrontation with the West – or it may continue to justify the perception that it is now a “rogue state.”

If Putin is removed, then this would assume that the stakeholders, his inner circle, the chiefs-inside-the-system can meet, negotiate and bargain and find a consensus over successor team or ‘transition alliance’. This in turn assumes that factional interests can be evenly balanced and the current regime is self-sustaining and resilient without Putin, or with Putin as a symbolic head (President of the State Union).

However, these assumptions can be challenged. In an increasingly personalistic regime, Putin is the glue that binds the elite together. Consensus is not possible. For the *siloviki*, if Putin could agree to

step aside or could be persuaded, what follows could raise the fear of *perestroika II* leading to system collapse. Furthermore, and unlike the Brezhnev period, there are no real formal mechanisms to appoint a successor, no Party to provide a cohering elite matrix.

“Russian DPRK”

This scenario shares some similar characteristics with “Brezhnev 2.0” but differs in degree, scope, scale and most of all in tenor. As with the “Brezhnev 2.0” scenario, a securitocracy retains primacy. Russia’s national-security emergency regime becomes a *pariah* and Russia considered a rogue state. Russian-style DPRK nuclear blackmail is consecrated by mystical, apocalyptical “nuclear Orthodoxy”. The nationalization of oligarchs takes place under the rubric of ‘liquidation of property’. Autarky is declared as a national goal and necessary defiant response to sanctions. State-organized crime symbiotic relations are strengthened as organized crime groups break sanctions for the state, merging patriotic impulses and profit principles. State control of the media is absolute, and campaigns to “clean up” fifth and sixth columnists are justified through claims that these “internal Nazi agents” have ruined the Russian economy. In foreign policy we see the emergence of a Russian imperium consisting of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine in the name of “restored Slavic unity”. “Territories” that fall outside “ancient Russian lands” and the “triune state” are not forcibly incorporated into the imperial core. “Forced neutrality” and buffer zone status is imposed on Georgia and Moldova.

This scenario is based on two assumptions: elite and societal challenges to Putin are not forthcoming and Putin’s “all-or-nothing” mindset means that he is determined to remain in power. What beliefs do these assumptions rest on? First, that Putin’s control of the FSB and National Guard are absolute, and because of this he can discount elite or societal opposition. Second, predictive thinking within the elites (the defense industrial complex, the *siloviki*, and the military) calculate that having irrevocably burnt bridges with the West, Russia’s strategic choices are stark: subordination to China and stability or to maintain strategic autonomy at terrible domestic cost. If the choice falls between being “greater Kazakhstan with nuclear weapons” or a “DPRK’s nuclear attention-getting unpredictability but poverty”, then this current Russian elite will choose the latter. Better unstable and unpredictable but strategically relevant, the thinking goes, than a stable nuclear armed Chinese proxy. Third, it assumes that those willing to remove Putin are unable and that those able are unwilling.

We can look to two powerful drivers and the immediate trigger of this “Russian DPRK” scenario, which moves Russia beyond the “Brezhnev 2.0” alternative. First, extreme rhetoric propagated by the Russian state-controlled media continues to radicalize itself. Narrative triggers that dehumanize Ukrainians as “Nazi”, fascists, reflecting official policy of “denazification” call now for “total war”. Russia’s media posits Putin’s unprovoked aggression as an existential struggle between “us” and “them”, demanding “cleansing” and “liquidation” as the only viable responses. Second, it appears likely that martial law will be declared in Russia, creating a permissive “total war” context. This will involve national mobilization, conscription, a war time economy and the closing of state borders. The trigger that marks this descent into darkness will be the ‘Battle of Kyiv’. This coming catastrophe brings into juxtaposition the dissonance at the heart of Putin’s narrative: in which universe is it necessary to storm “the mother of all Russian cities” to “restore Slavic unity”? Elites and society are forced to double-down along with Putin or revolt. Martial law is designed to preempt revolt, allowing the Russian military and security services to preventively occupy the streets of Moscow.

Conclusions:

- Open questions remain. How far does the ideological narrative constructed by Putin around “Slavic unity” and the necessary means of the Great Patriotic War place policy constraints on Putin and Russian foreign and security policy? For Ukraine, if ideology is driving Russian policy, might this mean that “Novorossiya” becomes the intermediate goal, leading to a demilitarized rump Ukraine and “denazification” in “Russian Ukraine”? Do “ancient Russian lands” include Transnistria, northern Kazakhstan, South Ossetia and Abkhazia? Or does pragmatism prevail? That the ideological factor clearly weighs more heavily in Russian risk/reward calculus than most analysts realized is now a given. But where is the recalibrated balance between Putin’s outbursts (*passionarity*) and military aggression to purge the past of historical grievances and the rational

and pragmatic application of *realpolitik* principles in support of Russia's legitimate state interests in the present? Does Russian policy become hostage to Putin's own narrative? This narrative, baptized as it is in the blood of Ukrainians, is too militant, militarized, Slavic, Orthodox, imperial, revisionist, revanchist and chauvinistic to have any traction outside of Russia's borders, or even within the non-ethnic Russian parts of the Russian Federation.

- What of the Russia-China axis? China may expedite negotiations, having stated that it "understands Russia's security concerns" but it will continue to hedge. It is too early for China to draw conclusive lessons about the effectiveness of the Russian military, the scale and scope of sanctions following military intervention or the likely evolution of the nature of its functional axis with Russia. Pragmatism in China's relations with Russia will prevail.
- The declaration of martial law in Russia and the fall of Kyiv could constitute inflection points, with the first the harbinger of and necessary precursor for the second. Both events force the Russian public and elites to confront the reality of their likely future. Neutrality is no longer an option. Recalibration of interests may still lead to dramatic breaks from the two "continuity-but-more-so" scenarios above. Might a military *coup* become the only mechanism of power transition, given Putin's control over the FSB and National Guard? If so, what follows?
- Putin's war of conquest over Ukraine has created a "geopolitical Europe", one that is determined "to ensure a free Ukraine, and then to re-establish peace and security across our continent", in the words of Joseph Borrell. To that end, calibrated responses and coordinated policy approaches are needed to ensure sanctions are smart and targeted and humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine is timely, Western national interests are protected and its values are upheld and miscalculation leading to escalation is avoided. However, the desire to achieve all three goals poses a difficult and testing trilemma. Given the unfolding scale of the humanitarian disaster in Ukraine and the real and visible suffering of Ukrainians on a mass scale, might the West be able to achieve only two of its three objectives? If so, which two?
 - 1) apply sanctions and provide humanitarian and military aid;
 - 2) uphold national interests, democratic values and principles; and
 - 3) avoid miscalculation and escalation.
- In the context of mass civilian casualties, how does the West calibrate and balance moral principles that reflect its values with pragmatic approaches in line with interests? At what point does "responsibility to protect" trump other considerations? How the US, "geopolitical Europe", friends and allies together manage this trilemma will shape the destiny of Ukraine and determine the contours of our New Cold War paradigm.

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Disclaimer: This summary reflects the views of the authors (Mark Galeotti and Graeme P. Herd) and are not necessarily the official policy of the United States, Germany, or any other governments.