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“Putin Invades Ukraine: Regional Fallout?”

Context:

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has had a devastating impact on humanitarian conditions within Ukraine itself. Critical national infrastructure in Ukraine is under attack. Ukraine’s transport system, hospitals and communication networks are being degraded. The UNHCR reports that over 2 million Ukrainians, mainly women and children, have become refugees in neighboring countries, particularly Poland. At the same time, Russian military advances in Ukraine appear to have stalled in most operational theatres. Explanations for this unexpected outcome include logistical difficulties, poor planning, long and vulnerable supply lines, and an inability to execute combined arms warfare effectively. In places where Russia has taken territory, a hostile civil population protests in the rear, even in Russian-speaking regions such as Kherson. Can captured territory be held?

However, the picture is fluid and Russia is not yet fully committed. While Russia will seek to bombard the pivots and hubs used to supply military *materiel* through Poland and Romania, its usable precision guided weapon stockpile for this “special military operation” is fast depleting, though reserves are available for operations against NATO. Ukraine is able to create reserve battalions around Lviv and receive air defense and anti-tank capabilities. Poland has offered to hand over its entire inventory of 23 MiG-29 fighter aircraft to the US at Ramstein Air Base in Germany for potential transfer to Ukraine pending a NATO decision. These combat aircraft can be flown by Ukrainian pilots. Romania, Slovakia and Hungary also have MiG-29s in their inventories and some or all of these could also be provided to Ukraine. Russia does not have the troop to task ratio to occupy an unwilling Ukraine. And Ukrainian resistance is growing, with the calculation in Kyiv that any deal made today will not be as good as the one made a week from now.

This deadlock is dangerous as Putin needs a “special military operation” victory to support his “everything going according to plan” narrative. Thus, if “victory is not possible and defeat is not an option” – if the choice is between bloody debilitating occupation or withdrawal - then Putin may seek to escalate by opening new fronts to present the Russian public with distracting mini-breakthroughs and victories in the wider region. Short-term risks in the Black Sea region appears highest. Longer-term risks include disruptions to energy and food exports from Russia and Ukraine, and conflicts around Exclusive Economic Zones in the Black Sea, for example, as borders are redrawn but not recognized. This summary identifies short and longer term spillover risks in both regions.

Black Sea Region

Had the “special military operation” actually gone to plan, Kyiv would have fallen within 2-4 days, and in a “best case” scenario from a Russian perspective, resistance would implode and Ukraine suffer sullen occupation. At this point the risks of spillover to Moldova and Georgia would have been much higher. The ideological narrative constructed by Putin around “Slavic unity” and regathering “ancient Russian lands” may have included Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. If not, then this would have suggested EU membership was off the cards for both states and imposed neutrality (“demilitarization”) would have been attempted by Russia.

However, without first capturing Odesa (still possible through a combined air assault and amphibious landing operation) and finding troops to occupy Ukraine in the context of a hostile and debilitating insurgency, military operations into Moldova do not appear viable. Transnistrian forces themselves have no offensive capability and rail links to Odesa region from Tiraspol are cut. Thus, while in Moldova pro-Russian parties and opposition groups in the breakaway Dniester region and the pro-

Russian Gagauzia oppose EU accession, Russia aggression in Ukraine propels the majority of the society to support this westward economic and normative reorientation, as is the case in Georgia.

However, the seizure of Georgian territory is possible. Russia's Black Sea Fleet has been remarkably passive and inactive and still has the reserves and capacity to act. The seizure of Poti region in Georgia is a possibility, supported by Chechen forces formally subordinated to Russia's *Rosgvardia* (National Guard) but actually under the control of Ramzan Kadyrov. If Putin's power weakens, Kadyrov may also plan to act more autonomously into the Pankisi Gorge, even if in the name of Putinism and justified with reference to Russian national goals. In such circumstances, Azerbaijan might look to complete "unfinished business" towards Nagorno-Karabakh.

In Georgia itself, the Russian invasion of Ukraine further polarizes society. There is pressure on Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili and 'Georgia Dream' party who have adopted a "neutral" policy towards Russia. Neutrality translates into a policy of not supporting international sanctions and keeping Georgia's air space open to Russian aircraft. Since 24 February opposition rallies in Tbilisi have protested daily against the Russian invasion outside the Georgian Parliament, demanding: 1. A visa regime with Russia; 2. Banning Russian media/propaganda outlets in Georgia; and 3. Closing Georgia's airspace to Russia.

The role of Turkey is pivotal. Turkey attempts to avoid alienating Russia by keeping its air space open to Russian commercial flights and not applying sanctions. As a result, Turkey, like Georgia, is not included on the Russian list of hostile states. However, Turkey does send effective military aid (drones) to Ukraine. Turkey, citing Article 19 of the Montreux Convention, has closed the entrance to the Black Sea to the navies of the parties to the conflict. With its "sea bridge" unable to function, Russia is forced to resupply Syria using a more expensive and more limited air bridge. This in turn weakens Russia's presence in Syria relative to Turkey's. At the same time, the US and NATO face a difficult choice regarding the sending of combat ships into the Black Sea in support of Bulgaria and Romania. Turkey attempts to dissuade allies from requesting access, but the need to protect two exposed allies is growing.

Baltic Sea Region

The risk of spillovers into the Baltic-Nordic region are less than the Black Sea region, at least in the short-term and while the "active phase" of Russian aggression in Ukraine is ongoing. Risks associated with Kaliningrad proves to be the exception to this general rule. If the closure of air space is joined by cutting rail links to Kaliningrad, then this could generate a Russian kinetic response. In addition, reports of resignations and refusal of Belarusian officers and soldiers to follow orders and deploy to Ukraine suggest that Lukashenko's regime may be less stable than supposed. Does Russia have the spare capacity to bolster Belarus, when *Rosgvardia* is needed at home as a praetorian safeguard to quell protest potential in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other cities in Russia?

The Estonian Center Party has severed ties to the United Russia Party. On 5 March, 103 members of its extended board, with no abstentions, voted to rescind the cooperation protocol signed in 2004. In Latvia, though, the polarization of society is a danger, with pro-Russian supporters using provocative rhetoric to radicalise their potential voters ahead of parliamentary elections. Two potential conflict dates loom - the commemoration of Latvian Legionnaires on 16 March and the Soviet Victory Day on 9 May. Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Gabrielius Landsbergis has stated that Vilnius has no red lines regarding possible sanctions against Russia - including oil and gas.

Non-aligned Finland and Sweden seek even closer defense cooperation with each other and with NATO. Indeed, the potential for NATO membership has increased and this will lead to heightened tension in medium to long-term. Defense spending is set to increase in all Baltic States. Lithuania adds an extra \$0.5bn and its parliament agrees to increase defense spending to 2.5% of GDP. Spending will likely be on deterrent gaps in capabilities necessary to counter Russia's way of war, such as air defense and drones.

Points of escalation might be driven by the possible use of thermobaric bombs in Kyiv, and/or the slaughter of Ukrainian refugee convoys struggling to reach the Polish border from Lviv. Such horrific violence would stress-test to destruction the ability of NATO member states to achieve all three of its objectives: 1) apply sanctions to Russia and provide humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine; 2) uphold

national interests, democratic values and principles; and 3) avoid miscalculation, spillover and escalation. As RHSS#3 summary noted: “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?” Almost certainly risk calculus in NATO would change, with a much greater emphasis on alleviating immediate suffering and the “responsibility to protect”.

Conclusions:

- The invasion has also shaken the Putin regime in Russia. The Putinist system, born in the violence of the Second Chechen campaign, has grown organically over the last 23 years. It weathered the ‘Moscow Maidan’ protests of 2011-12 and was boosted by the Crimea annexation of 2014. Putin and the players in the system understood the rules of the game, how these rules could be enforced and the necessity of a balance between the normative state, parastatal entities and oligarchs. In 2022, the pressure of sanctions disrupts and destabilizes oligarchs, the business models of parastatal entities and the normative state moves to a war footing, its lead representatives complicit in the war and war crimes.
- In this context, escalation does not have just to be horizontal – a spillover into the wider region - but it can be vertical. The possibility of an accidental radioactive discharge due to Russian attack on nuclear power plant is high. If nuclear signaling is needed, Russia could withdrawal from the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and then promptly stage a nuclear test to intimidate and deter. A low likelihood event involves a Russian “false flag” operation around CBRNE might be considered. A “dirty bomb” fits Russian media narratives that a US-controlled “neo-Nazi” regime would practice genocidal “nuclear terrorism”. The function of this narrative could be to provide a retroactive justification for invasion – prevention of nuclear terrorism - and to place the blame for any nuclear radiation leakage on Kyiv. Such leakages would massively impact on refugee flows westwards. For Putin such flows would be understood in terms of an asymmetric responses by Russia to western pressure.
- Might Putin be tempted to declare martial law or a state of emergency in Russia? Putin may calculate that full mobilization is a necessary means to offset 1) battlefield losses through conscription; 2) economic isolation and rent redistributions to shore up elite support; and 3) evidence the idea that this is an existential fight for Russia, that Ukraine is merely the territory upon which Russia battles the real enemy – NATO. Such reasoning concludes that once battle is joined all measures are justified by Russia if this leads to the defeat of NATO.
- If such reasoning prevails, martial law and mobilization in Russia could prove to be the second and last strategic blunder by Putin. Russian military reforms introduced by Defense Minister Serdyukov 2009-2012 means mass mobilization is not possible – the Russian military does not have the capacity or infrastructure to train such large numbers. Moreover, such a move might precipitate a societal revolt, one in which the Russian security services would struggle to maintain order. Alternatively, it could encourage a military *coup*, with a charismatic and politically acceptable Defense Minister Shoigu at its head. Given “everything is forever until it is no more”, the entourage and inner-circle around Putin may well calculate that the president himself is the problem and his removal the solution.
- Fear of failure in Ukraine and fear of revolt and removal in Russia likely increases Putin’s isolation and paranoia. He may then adopt a differentiated understanding of risk. At home he is risk averse. Martial law or declaring a state of emergency is avoided. Putin likely compensates by accepting greater risk abroad. This suggests a Black Sea Fleet “special military operation” against Poti could come into focus, or Russia looks to conducts a dirty bomb “false flag” operation in Ukraine. In Putin’s mind, both options would create disruptive situations to generate options and new opportunities for leverage and exploitation.

GCMC, March 9, 2022.

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