

THE CLOCK TOWER SECURITY SERIES



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Summary

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Introduction

This summary is a synthesis by Graeme P. Herd of the presentations by Pavel Baev, Mark Galeotti, Nadine Godehardt, Dmitry Gorenburg, David Lewis, Janis Kluge, Hanna Smith and Falk Tettweiler and extensive discussions at the SCSS Berlin Workshop on 24 May 2022.

Session 1: Beijing-Moscow-Kyiv: Strategic Lessons Learned and Denied?

- Russian blunders in Ukraine are rooted in pre-existing and deep-seated strategic, military, and political cultures. These blunders have resulted in a contradictory “fluid stalemate,” as well as exhausted and degraded Russian forces. Official “everything going according to plan” propagandist narratives do not allow for, let alone incentivize, innovative results-orientated approaches: Russia cannot learn from defeats that it does not recognize. In a “battle of resilience,” Ukraine is winning. If the war continues for three more months, there is no need for U.S. troops to reinforce Europe.
- Russia’s leadership cannot learn any potential “lessons” identified in Donbas operations between 2014 and 2022 as engagements here were officially denied. In Syria, Russian Aerospace Forces operated in parallel with Syrian and Iranian, not Russian, ground forces and so there are no combined arms “lessons” to be learned and applied. Instead, Russia falls back on existing tactics and strategy which stress positional mass artillery barrages though Ukraine adopts a more dynamic fire and move approach. Greater Russian firepower cannot compensate for less Russian manpower. Kinzhal is not decisive as the arsenal is too limited and targeting is uncertain; Russia lacks the essential ability to integrate different strike capabilities.
- The orderly retreat from Kyiv – days ahead of what would have been a route – highlight some adaptive ability. Putin’s decision not to declare “special operation” as “war” on 9 May and order full mobilization also demonstrates an ability still to surprise, as does Russia’s “mellow” response to Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO.
- From a Russian perspective, China’s footprint in its “special operation” is apparent in three respects: 1) poor equipment supplies which speak more to corruption than cooperation; 2) a degree of political trust that allows Russia to accept the risk of deploying ground troops from the Far Eastern Military District to Ukraine; and, 3) as



Russia's war in Ukraine is in part designed to cause the final collapse of the Western liberal international rules-based order so highlighting Russia's great power – China's withdrawal of support or the continued existence of that order challenges this foundational legitimizing Russian narrative.

- The 4 February 2022 “no limits friendship” joint declaration noted that the “fate of states are interconnected.” This fits into the Chinese view that there is no existence without coexistence. It reiterated respect for statehood and non-interference in domestic affairs and stated that the liberal international order needed to be transformed, though within the UN framework and International Law. For China the end state is a “common destiny of mankind” which places the United States and China as peers, affording each other mutual respect and enjoying peaceful coexistence.
- In reality, the CCP understands Russia's invasion of Ukraine in terms of: 1) legitimate Russian security interests; 2) Russia's need to suppress a “Nazi” Ukrainian regime – even if Putin wrongly assessed the Ukrainians themselves would perceive this as “liberation”; and, 3) as a proxy war which validates Chinese assumptions around a confrontational U.S. and NATO wedded to Cold War thinking. China reinforces Russia's social media framing of the invasion as a Western neo-colonial struggle which Russia resists, and while such traction is limited in the Middle East it has purchase more generally in the Global South.
- China believes Ukraine is in no way analogous to Taiwan – in political terms Taiwan is considered internal to China and in practical reality an amphibious operations against a sea fortress harder than ground forces crossing contiguous borders. U.S. increased security cooperation with Taiwan and its leverage of the AUKUS format will give rise to an arms race. More broadly, China sees western predominance eroding and its promotion of “follow your own path” to development garners support in the Global South. Volatility, rising energy and agricultural product prices, infrastructure connectivity and supply chain disruption are clear Chinese concerns.
- Is Russia's invasion of Ukraine the catalyst for a fundamental shift in today's Sino-Russian axis in which the Xi–Putin relationship is central? Xi does not want to contemplate a post-Putin Russia. China's current narrative is that two major powers – Russia and China – seek to change the Western dominated rules-based order. A war of attrition which weakens Russia irrevocably is not in China's interest as it deprives China of a functioning axis that can act as strategic counter-weight to US hegemony. China has no interest in influencing Putin, nor is it clear if it has the means to do so should the interest arise. China will exhibit greater caution in relations with Russia, avoiding too great a dependence on the axis. However, it is not clear which other major power replaces Russia. India's behavior is a critical factor.

Session 2: After Ukraine: Russia, China and Regional Order?

- We can identify three strands of thinking in Moscow concerning regional order in the context of the special operation in Ukraine – these in part represent ideas for action but also ad hoc rationalizations of possible pathways forward:
 - **Liberal Commentators – “Russia in retreat:”** Russia is in the process of losing the war and as it weakens it's FDI and technological dependence on China is strengthened. Russia fails as a legitimate leader in post-Soviet space – it does not constitute an attractive socio-economic model. Sanctions cause a radical



reshaping of Russian trade with China, but also its ability to invest in Central Asia, cutting economic growth across the region to 2.6% or less in 2022. Economic weakness and war in Ukraine diminishes Russia's ability to be the security provider and guarantor of security in Central Asia (with spillover dangers from Afghanistan and actual instability in eastern Tajikistan) and undercuts Russian regional integrationist projects (EEU/CSTO). China becomes the dominant actor in Central Asia, Turkey in the Caucasus and the EU in the West – Russia is in retreat in post-Soviet space.

- **Pragmatists – “Russia muddles through:”** Russia avoids isolation by engaging the Global South, western disunity returns, trade with China increases in some sectors (e.g. coal x2 in 2022). Russia still has a role to play in Central Asia: China supports the existing division of labor, with China focused on the economic and developmental sectors and Russia political-security matters. Even if Russia is a weaker player after the war, China is unlikely to want to fill the role of security provider. For example, if there is destabilization on the Afghan border, China is unlikely to want to manage a crisis alone: its preference would be for Russia to be in the lead. Central Asia can emerge as a “grey zone” for sanctions breaking and organized crime and other illicit transactions.
- **Ideological – “Ethno-nationalist revisionist Russia:”** This strain of thought is revisionist, understanding Russia's existential confrontation with Ukraine and the West a way of breaking the current international order and reshaping global order. Such “old political thinking” is based on balance of power, pluralism and a belief on the utility of military force. In that worldview, an alignment with China against the West is seen as vital. But this could be upset by the ideological strand of Russian ethno-nationalism that could be destabilizing (e.g. in relation to northern Kazakhstan). Central Asian states are not ideological but pragmatic, preferring multi-vector balancing to choosing sides in a bipolar confrontation.
- **China's as “black box”** as access and contacts are cut, it becomes ever harder to distinguish rumor from conspiracy from opinion. It is though clear that China's approach to Central Asia is different from Russia's, both in terms of means and ends. Its formation demonstrates how China views its global role.
 - The SCO was the first of the China + X mechanism and the only regional organization China has created. China's structuring and ordering of this region indicates its understanding of its role in world regions and so its vision of its role in global order. China's primary focus has been on regional order and stable “neighborly relations.” An underlying Chinese assumption is apparent – Central Asia lacks internal agency, order is created on Chinese terms.
 - While the West had had a linear view of how relations with China unfold, multi-dimensional spatialization is a feature of Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping. China has a connective concept of “docking” or “linking,” including Central Asian transportation hubs linking China geographically with Europe as “end destination” but also Central Asia as the “in between space” with transnational digital payments systems, satellites and other layers of Sino-centric technology. Xi's recent emphasis on global security, highlighting particularly the safety of global supply chains, underscores this approach – it is global, maritime and continental and digital. Currently more than 1000 container ships stand-off



China's east coast ports awaiting unloading, a zero-COVID policy and the disruption caused by Russia's invasion, indicate that in 6-8 weeks the unpredictable knock-on impact will be felt globally.

- **Is China trapped by Russian geopolitical adventurism?** CCP leadership took two weeks to issue a statement after 24 February invasion (which was not a “lame” MFA statement but CCCP leadership). As China reads across from Ukraine to Taiwan, an ideal outcome for China would be Russia claims victory, Ukraine remains as a neutral state, Russia controls Donbas. China reaps the strategic advantage of Russian energy at cheap prices. (Russia faces the challenge of explaining to itself Chinese control over its energy sector – investors, contractors, development).
- **Where are China-Russia red lines? What is the conflict potential between the two?** The functional axis is interest based and once those interests no longer exist then “friendship” can fast fade. However, short of energy and unrestricted NSR access, China does not need much else from Russia.
 - China and Russia have different interests in the Northern Sea Route – the maritime dimension of BRI through Central Asia. With regards to such sea lanes, China and the US adopt a similar understanding, one which Canada and Russia oppose.
 - Russia tries to diversify links in the Indo-Pacific, supporting Vietnam and India – both strategic opponents of China.
 - China's attitudes to sovereignty and territorial integrity in Central Asian SCO states may be much less flexible than in Ukraine or Belarus. Russian incursions into Kazakhstan may elicit different responses.

Session 3: RSS#6 - “China-Russia Nexus: Transatlantic Threat Assessment(s)?”

- **Hybrid threats activities** as used by Russia and China are designed to 1) undermine democracies and democratic processes, 2) impact on their decision making algorithm and 3) saturate the capacity of the target and the create cascading effects. Such activity seeks to test and exploit vulnerabilities, can be short and long-term, are tailored to different regional contexts and very often leverage and weaponize history.
- **In Finland and Sweden** the situational awareness of the potential hybrid threats activity from China and Russia in the context of NATO accession is high. One of the reasons for this is that with NATO accession the attitude towards the accession is clear. It is always harder to determine the actual threats to specific national interests. NATO accession and hybrid threats can be understood in terms of three phases:
 - **1) Pre-application:** given decision making in Stockholm and Helsinki was so quick and the decision to apply so sudden, hybrid threats did not materialize in opposition to this process – Russia and China were rendered reactive;
 - **2) Grey zone:** the period between application and actual membership provides the greatest opportunity to challenge and discredit membership.
 - In Finland, there are multiple ways this could be done and some things have been already detected; cyber and disinformation attacks, attempts to harness those that support the Russia agenda, threats by Russia to withdraw from bilateral projects (waterway); questioning of the Aland Island status as a demilitarized zone and the



status of Finnish companies in Russia (this however is connected also to a larger context of the sanctions), and threats of unspecified military consequences on accession. Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zakharova states that “the Russian military will decide” what those consequences may be. China has reacted negatively but so far hybrid threat activity has not been visible. Previously China has used cyber tools to spy on the Finnish Parliament (trend that seem to have occurred elsewhere as well) and usage of United People’s Front especially its networks related to universities.

- In Sweden the situation is a bit similar; more hybrid threat activity before then this spring; disinformation campaigns have been constant and there is also an example of infiltration into the Swedish Parliament and intelligence services by Russia. Chinese hybrid threat activities in Sweden have been vigorous. It is a larger and more active hybrid threat actor than Russia in Sweden, practicing “wolf warrior” diplomacy, threatening journalists, parliamentarians and experts and raising questions over Chinese investments in Swedish critical national infrastructure.
- **3) Post-accession:** probable normalization of hybrid threat activity akin to other NATO member states. Here Finland and Sweden will need to restart relations with Russia from scratch.
 - As long as Russia is waging a war in Ukraine its ability to do hybrid threat activity is lower. In the case of Ukraine, early conclusions can be made that Russia’s conventional military attacks from 24 February point to the lack of success of its aim to achieve strategic goals. There is also the question of whether the hybrid threat activity slowed democratization processes but strengthened Ukrainian sense of nationhood.
 - Both autocracies and democracies have the same practice of exerting influence over adversaries, however democracies are constrained by democratic practices like rule of law and inability of the state to compel independent media to undertake information operations or private companies to work for the state or individuals to be used to inform. The democratic states have different strategic culture to design influence operations and there is often openly declared aims. Therefore, the hybrid threat activity is what autocracies do against democratic states.
- **Russian foreign policy** from perhaps as early as 1993, certainly 1995, has sought to attain 3 goals: 1) Russian Great Power status; 2) maintain a sphere of influence in neighboring states; 3) protecting Russia from encroachments from the West. These goals remain the same but Russia’s power has weakened and changed both relative to neighbors and the West. In terms of Russian threat assessment of the West, 3 elements can be identified:
 - **1) NATO enlargement:** the military dimension involved the proliferation of NATO military infrastructure; the geopolitical threat was encroachment into Russia’s sphere of influence;



- **2) Regime change:** this was first perceived as a political threat following the Rose and Orange revolutions of 2003 and 2004, but by 2014 Russian military doctrine identified color revolutions as military threats, highlighting a perception in Moscow that legitimate regimes could be changed via secret plans, external western organization and the export of destabilization/chaos designed to promote anti-Russian hostile states to limit Russian influence and ultimately weaken Russia.
- **3) Negation of Russia’s nuclear deterrent:** western missile defense and prompt global strike are designed to eliminate Russia’s nuclear deterrent and Russia discounts U.S. promises these systems are not targeting Russia.
- **Role of China in Russian threat perception:** Though historically the “China threat” is a feature of Russian strategic culture, this threat perception has dissipated as Russian Far East Military District ground troop deployment in Ukraine attests, though China’s economic threat potential to Russia has increased. Implicitly, while neither threatens the other, there is no expectation of direct mutual military support. Prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the assumption held that Russia could still, where interests aligned, cooperate with the West or even together build a new international order. This assumption is no longer valid. Russian efforts with China to weaken Western liberal international order and economic dominance are much harder.

Session 4: Ukraine, Strategic Competition and Policy Implications Roundtable?

- Catastrophic success? In an ideal Western end-state, Ukraine and Russia emerge as democratic and the global economy prospers. However, might Ukraine and the West win the war but lose the peace? Russian strategic military-political defeat in Ukraine may lead to regime implosion. If crisis is opportunity:
 - Ukraine may emerge, in the words of President Zelensky, as “Big Israel,” a state whose identity is defined by existential threat, whose institutions are securitized and which is thriving, democratic, and resilient.
 - More generally, Russian neighbors may express their agency: Moldova advances towards EU integration; Georgia contemplates competing impulses - reintegrate South Ossetia or trade with Russia on Georgian terms; Lukashenka attempts to instrumentalize a protracted war in Ukraine to re-establish Belarus’ multi-vector credentials and so regime continuity.
 - Russia elects to fight on two fronts: 1) a 20th Century war in Ukraine that it is losing; 2) a 21st Century confrontation and conflict with the ‘political West’ that it currently loses. Ukraine and the political West are in synch – but could over time diverge.
- **Putin’s Ukraine victory as a post-Putin regime change mechanism:**
 - Did Putin plan on winning the war to secure an exit from formal politics: winning enables Putin to leaving presidential power as “untouchable?” If so, then a protracted conflict locks Putin further into the increasingly uncertain political realities of Russia, demanding he now, captive in the Kremlin, build an actual “power vertical” to survive.
 - Putinism exists but are there actual Putinists? Supporters of Putin are ruthless, opportunistic and self-interested pragmatists, loyal to the extent their interests are enabled by Putin in power. Tensions in Russia’s security services exist – Zolotov,



- Bortnikov, Shoigu are publicly absent. Rosgvardia members express disillusionment on vKontakte social media channels, resenting their perceived use as cannon-fodder in the “special operation.” Elite discussions acknowledge that “we are stuck”, the worrying (for Putin) step before, “unless...” The momentum of elite defections in 1989 and 1991 a real factor: the more fragmented the elite the greater the potential for defections.
- Radical nationalist Strelkov-type narratives around extermination actions necessary for victory are not yet expressed by Putin but this is the direction of travel. On the basis of Ukraine, the notion that what comes after Putin is much worse is unproven.
 - **Sanctions and market realities:** the economic damage inflicted by sanctions on Russia remains unclear: Russian GDP is expected to fall between 5-30% of GDP; trade between sanctioning states and Russia fall between 50-70%. Economic markets are spaces not actors and within these spaces companies are the actors. The economies of both Russia and China rely on the decentralized management of economic decision-making. Russia does not have the institutional capacity to control Russian companies and their private interests. The global economy is one common dollar denominated space that shares values and institutions. China is integrated into this space. It is an either/or proposition. If Russia is not integrated it moves further from China. Chinese – Russian trade was in decline before the war broke out and it is now the question how much trade will bounce back in light of Russia’s declining trade with the West. As a minimum, it would make it difficult for China to cooperate with Moscow when Russia is less than ever integrated in the world economy.
 - Sanctions float like a toxic cloud over Russia’s economy – acting as a clear incentive to disengage unless in sectors such as energy where the risk can be controlled. China will not take over the place of EU Europe in the Russian economy but will serve as partial replacement. Decentralized economies deal well with scarcity but are fragile in the face of uncertainty.
 - China can be opportunistic and find the appropriate risk-reward equilibrium in key sectors, but can only partially replace the West. China has a clear interest in trade and export but not in including Russia in its supply chains. Foreign (Chinese/Western) capital will not return to Russia as the trust upon which investments are bases are burnt.

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