Strategic Competition Seminar Series (SCSS)
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Summary

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Introduction

This is a summary of discussions from the second workshop of the GCMC's Strategic Competition Seminar Series, held in Garmisch-Partenkirchen on 20-21 September 2022.

Session 1: Roundtable: Russia-China Nexus: Dynamics, Trajectories?

- **The US** understands that the alignment between Russia and China has three key features. Both Russia and China: 1) question the rules-based world order (not representative, advance US interests); 2) develop disruptive technologies (AI, nano, hypersonic); 3) offer economic and normative models that deny individual liberty, democratic rights, and the rule of law (the values upon which the Russo-Chinese alignment is founded). Russia-Chinese partnership is supported by military cooperation, Russian resources/energy and Chinese consumer goods exports and a privileging of their respective "core interests" above all else, even wider compatible geopolitical interests. China does not, for example, offer Russia material assistance to prosecute its war in Ukraine, and does express support for the principle of non-interference.
- **In Germany** Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine was a shock for an SPD-Green-Liberal coalition government. The coalition treaty of December 2021 was predicated on a continuation of Germany's export market growth model, which in turn presupposed cheap Russian gas and stable and predictable global markets. The war became the "external necessity" to decouple the German economy from Russia's economy. This process is underway and is irreversible. It also raised the specter of an "autocratic alliance" as an anti-Western coalition which threatens open markets and the German business model. Assessments and reappraisals note that strategic decoupling from China could be a potential policy response, though the structural constraints (Germany's investments in and so exposure to China's economy) are much greater. There is no current political consensus amongst coalitional partners and no "external necessity" (such as the invasion of Taiwan) to trigger a policy change.
- **Russia's leadership's approach** is not monolithic and reflects a mix of ideological and pragmatic concession-seeking considerations. Three perspectives can be highlighted:

- 1) Liberal view (Russian opposition): Russia's economic dependence and junior partner status undercuts Russia's strategic autonomy and diplomatic influence and leads to political isolation. As Russia cannot balance economic asymmetry with military relations, it must make concessions in the Arctic, as well as on military technology transfers, and place limits on its hedging behavior with India and Vietnam;
- 2) Bipolar world (Valdai Club/Karaganov): Russia should align with a stronger China against a weaker West to ensure that Russia is not an adjunct to the West. Russia helps generate a new world order, even if Russia serves as a "battering ram" for China against the West;
- 3) "Transactional Middle:" the relationship is driven from below by non-ideological pragmatic corporate interests. Russian coal magnates, for example, have vested interests in railroad and port infrastructure developments and trade expected to reach $190-200bn in 2022 while independent Chinese oil refineries seek cheap oil.

- **China's perspective** is dominated by three considerations. First, China wants the relationship to be viewed by other states as close and important (superior and special), a desire underscored by 40 Xi-Putin meetings since 2014, with the latest on 4 February and 15 September 2022, and language used in read-outs ("new model," "no limits") that stress the nexus' effectiveness and utility in generating benefits. Second, that the relationship rejects "U.S. hegemony" and promotes a "new type of responsible leadership" within a multipolar world. China's rhetoric is that it is the U.S. response to Ukraine that causes the conflict, just as U.S. behavior in the Indo-Pacific region has the same effect. Third, China's core interests and priorities are paramount and Chinese pragmatism understands that Russia is a junior partner, with greater political rather than economic utility for China.
- **Alliance**? Both Russia and China prefer their strategic autonomy, flexibility, and policy independence over the possibility of a formal by treaty military alliance, which is not needed for security guarantees or extended deterrence and would only bind and constrain each ally from exerting strategic autonomy, preventing each from freely dominating their respective spheres and managing their shared neighborhood. The peak in the nexus was possibly the eve of the COVID pandemic in January 2020, rather than prior to the invasion of Ukraine in January 2022. China ultimately seeks to make the world safe for China and will not expend political capital on Ukraine, which is not a core interest. The CPP's 20th Party Congress (November 2022) will likely consolidate Xi's power and mark continuity in China's approach to Russia. Both Russia and China project different global orders: Beijing seeks a revisionist, stable sphere of influence system in which China exercises global leadership via control of Asia, but a G-Zero world order of uncertainty and crisis best suits Russian interests.

Session 2: Russia-China in Asia?

- **Sino-Russian defense cooperation**: the PLA is an instrument of the CPP, upholding its power and protecting the territorial integrity of China. Both militaries have exercised at least 79 times since 2003. China's arms industry, formally reliant on Russia's Defense Industrial Complex, is increasingly independent and China views the U.S. as its strategic benchmark, not Russia. The PLA seeks mechanization by 2020 (COVID delays), modernization by 2027, "intelligent integration" massive use of (AI, Quantum Computing, etc. in conflicts, "integrated joint operations" and "system confrontation" as new concepts of conflict) by 2035, and a world class military (U.S. peer status) by 2050. For China, Ukraine does offer some lessons, validating styles of war fighting (targeting of infrastructure and military leadership, "attack the mind") and highlighting Western unity and determination to uphold sanctions regimes, including exclusion from SWIFT. In Asia, Russia's military utility for China is weak, though rhetorical support for "one China" is appreciated in Beijing. Russian arms sales and presence does allow Vietnam hedging possibilities and opportunities or others that wish for a third option between China and the United States.

- **Economic dimension**: prior to the invasion of Ukraine, Russia exported 200bcm of gas pa with Europe (which seeks to become independent of Russian gas by 2027) and 33bcm of gas to Asia. The Power of Siberia II pipeline has a maximum capacity of 50bcm pa. The most optimistic scenarios suggest that Russia may be able to export 120bcm of gas to Asia by 2030. China paused the Yamal LNG projects for fear of secondary sanctions and has other gas import options asides from Russia. For Russia, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan constitute alternative markets, but these states all sanction Russia over Ukraine. China seeks to be carbon neutral by 2060 and focuses on self-reliance. For these reasons, Russia's medium- and long-term gas export prospects are bleak. China can, to some extent, fill the vacuum left as Western companies leave the Russian market dominating some sectors (70% of mobile phone market) but joint ventures are hampered by Russia's reluctance to share its technologies and the inability to establish supply chains for advanced technologies which do not need Western suppliers.
- **Structural realities**: Do we see a rising China and stagnating Russia, or a globally present and relevant China which nevertheless is stagnating and a weak and wounded Russia? The "peaking power syndrome" suggests China may seek to "reunify" Taiwan through military invasion by 2027, as the internal driver of the need for self-reliance, nationalism, and national security become key modes of legitimation for Xi, offsetting China's demographic profile, it's estrangement from global technology hubs, and restrictions placed on its access to European markets (protectionism), and stagnating economic growth. Russia aligns its positions with India, Japan, and SE Asia to counterbalance China's geopolitical influence and become a "third pole" with a role in triangular US-Russia-China politics.

Session 3: Strategic Triangle: Russia, China, India?

- **India's Hedging Behavior:** India has demonstrated a historical aversion to military alliances, reflected in its leadership role within the non-aligned movement. In the Cold War, non-alignment could be understood as de facto neutrality and U.S. support for Pakistan was balanced by Soviet support for India. Non-alignment is now understood in terms of strategic autonomy, with India multi-aligned in a multi-polar context. India buys 70% of its armaments from Russia and cannot operate militarily against China without Russian materiel. India purchases S-400 air defense system, abstains on UNGA Russia sanctions over Ukraine, and partakes in the *Vostok* 2022 military exercise.
- **India-China:** China's external policy towards India in South Asia in general is creating domestic public opinion pressure to recalibrate India's policy to China. This pressure was exacerbated by the death of 20 Indian soldiers in June 2020 on the Chinese border

(highlighting China's superior border infrastructure) and China's shielding of Pakistan-supported terrorists. Xi-Modi summits in 2018 and 2019 did not normalize relations: China does not acknowledge India's status as a rising global power. India embraces multi-polarity to oppose Sino-centric hegemony. Decoupling India's economy from China's is not possible and India cannot fight China without alliances.

- **India-US:** China's promotion of the BRI is a point of concern for India and India's cooperation with the U.S. a concern for China. India has strengthened defense cooperation with the United States, which supports a democratic India's aspirations to be a UNSC P5 member. India's closer relations with the U.S. is in part a response to closer Russia-China alignment and also its own alignment with U.S. interests in Afghanistan. India has changed its rhetoric which suggested that the Russia's war in Ukraine was a Russia-NATO issue. In Samarkand on 15 September 2022 Prime Minister Modi directly told President Putin that "democracy, diplomacy and dialogue" were needed, not war, reflecting frustration in India's strategic community and military establishment over Russia's missteps and miscalculation in Ukraine. If Russia became China's junior partner in 2014, did it become India's in 2022?
- **Triangle:** India's criticism of Russia - if followed by any limitations in bilateral cooperation - has the potential to bring Russia closer to China, India's key strategic rival. Too close a Russo-Chinese alignment due to power asymmetries between the two becomes a redline for India, suggesting India maintain its arms procurement from Russia to lessen Russia's dependence on China. Both Russia and China seek to keep India in the non-Western if not anti-Western camp. India's tilt to the West is slow but steady, marked by India's diversification of arms procurement away from Russia and towards the UK, France, Israel, and the United States. States increasingly seek to align with India to counterbalance China. This trend will accelerate if Russia is defeated in Ukraine. For the West it is important to realize that an "if you are not with us, you are against us" rhetoric is not helpful. Respect for the strategic considerations of non-aligned states such as India is of paramount importance for not "losing" them in the context of strategic competition with authoritarian regimes.

Session 4: New Russo-Chinese Arctic/Nordic Dynamics?

- **Russia**: The Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation is regarded as "vital" for the country's military, economic, political, environmental security, and even its sense of cultural and historical identity. This has been confirmed by Russia's latest Maritime Doctrine (31 July 2022) where it warns against "efforts by a number of states to weaken Russian Federation control over the Northern Sea Route, a build-up of foreign naval presence in the Arctic, and an increase in conflict potential in this region." Russia's doctrine stresses its willingness to exert economic and military control of the region and to further develop the Northern Sea Route without external interference. NATO's 2022 Security Concept notes that "In the High North, [Russia's] capability to disrupt Allied reinforcements and freedom of navigation across the North Atlantic is a strategic challenge to the Alliance." However, Russia lacks the financial resources and technical expertise for such an expansive Arctic policy and the capabilities to enact its 2022 maritime doctrine without other nations (i.e. China) providing capital, capabilities and technology.

- **China** does perceive the Western sanctions regime against Russia as an opportunity to increase its own influence in the High North through the promotion of its "Polar Silk Road" project (linking China to Europe), its observer status in the Arctic Council, its self-declared "near-Arctic state" status, strengthening the PLA Navy and its icebreaker capabilities. China invests tens of billions of dollars in energy, infrastructure and research projects in the region. China also suggests that the Arctic is a "global commons," though 90% of estimated resources fall within the sovereign territory or EEZ of circumpolar states. To offset such pressure, Russia welcomes interest from India, Singapore, UAE, South Korea, and Japan as this provides alternative opportunities and lessens dependency on the West or China. Notably, Chinese shipping giant COSCO has not sent a single ship through the NSR this year, reflecting the wider international trend in a year that witnessed zero internationally flagged transit vessels traversing the NSR. Only internationally flagged LNG carriers sailed the NSR, transporting LNG from Yamal. This reflects a lack of trust in Russian transit mechanisms and perceived risk, as well as an inability to attain vessel insurance from the Western dominated market. It is likely that China will continue to look past its relationship with Russia and lay the ground work for exploitation of unlimited draft trans-polar routes by 2050 and beyond.
- **Ukraine War:** Sweden and Finland's decision to join NATO changed Russia's risk calculus in the Arctic and High North and Baltic Sea. Formerly non-aligned Finland and Sweden become a "NATO land-and air-bridge" linking the Baltic Sea to the North Atlantic and the Arctic, turning the Baltic Sea into a NATO lake in the process. What was once perceived as separate theatres will be a single strategic space for both Russia and NATO. Both will have to adapt to this new reality. In the short term, escalation potential could increase ("High North, High Tension" syndrome) as Russia needs to compensate for the overall diminution of its conventional military power due to attrition/degradation following its invasion of Ukraine (Russia has redeployed its Arctic brigades to Ukraine). The enlargement will likely heighten Russia's insecurities towards the protection of its strategic bastions in the High North, given that seven of the eight Arctic nations would be NATO allies. NATO needs to develop its strategic thinking on the Arctic, continue and increase High-North military training and capability development and, alongside the EU, ensure that avenues of dialogue with Russia function. In the long term, a stronger NATO in the High North and the Arctic is likely to diminish the risk of escalation and mitigate the security dilemma, as offense will have less advantage for Russia. This could pave the way for a renaissance for collaboration with Russia. The suspended Arctic Council remains the best mechanism for discussion of mutually beneficial Arctic cooperation, yet it prohibits discussion of military security matters. Dialogue on military security will remain severely limited, creating a risk of inadvertent escalation due to misunderstandings or misperceptions.

Session 5: Roundtable: Ukraine: Alternative Outcomes?

- **United Ukraine (UA)** integrating with the EU and NATO, gradually restores its territorial integrity with a combination of military and diplomatic means.
  - This alternative is conditioned on: domestic unity in Ukraine; UA continues successful counter-offensive (after an operational pause) into 2023; Western unity and support (U.S. key role, plus EU and G7), the gradual expansion of anti-Russian coalition; the Ramstein coalition sustaining deliveries around a campaign

plan rather than a chaotic supply of what is available in stock is matched by a financial equivalent able to coordinate and provide feedback loops; the EU opens accession negotiations and advances practical integration projects such as a common market; maintaining connection and re-settlement of 8 million IDPs (with 3 million refugee status in the EU); China maintains non-allied status and abides by sanctions; and Russian decision making elites understand the failure of the Putin doctrine and act accordingly.
    - The indicators of such an outcome include: collaborative resilient decentralized governance, trust in and legitimacy of the top leaders and wider Ukrainian institutions, such as the armed forces, emergency services and police, high morale reflected in hope in Ukraine's future, if only for the next generation, and continued support for mobilization in defense of Ukrainian statehood, western financial support and emergency assistance to sustain macro-economic stability and the functioning of the state ($38 bn pa needed for Ukraine to function); special tribunal and prosecutions for war crimes to ensure justice and disincentivize Russian malign behavior, and Russian domestic developments.
    - Implications for Russia: geopolitical damage, loss of prestige, and destruction of the eternal Russia myth, greater repression, delegitimization of Putin and his doctrine, leading to change and a period of reform and the curtailment of Russian imperial ambition.
- **Stalled Progress Ukraine (muddling through)** is more self-reliant but exhausted, inhabiting a grey-zone protracted conflict, a new line of conflict contacts, and inconclusive outcomes in which neither side prevails.
    - This is predicated on Putin limiting his efforts to Donbas, the stalling of Ukrainian counter-attacks and both Russian and Ukrainian operational exhaustion, the rise of a "give peace a chance" camp in the EU, limiting western aid, eroding sanctions, and impeding Ukraine's EU integration.
    - This implies Russia can present this alternative as a victory and is able to regroup and reconstitute its military, lobby for sanctions relief, and then over time launch a new war.
- **Failed state Ukraine -** Russia does not necessarily occupy new land but inflicts damage that leads to an unstable and chaotic state.
    - Russia announces general mobilization, Ukraine suffers hyperinflation and losses on the battlefield, an "incident: occurs at a nuclear civilian site, a deal imposed on President Zelensky is rejected by society and a new wave of refugees enters the EU as host county support, exacerbated by Russian information operations, fractures.
    - For Russia the implications are clear: use coercive measure to further fragment Ukraine and annex new territory with the aim of federalizing (or "Finlandizing") what is left; address the Ukrainian insurgency on the occupied territories and inside Russia but balance a heavy policing operation in Ukraine with risks to upheaval in Russia itself, while trying to install a "neutral" puppet regime in Kyiv.
- **Russian imperial identity**: Is there a foreseeable post-war period or is the new normal a permanent war to 2024 (Ukrainian C-in-C Gen Zaluzhny) and beyond? Will Ukraine survive as a unitary state? Whose and which war is this? Is it a war of imperial

breakdown and the stakes are the survival of Russian its current imperial state and so the eradication of Ukrainian culture and identity? Or a war of Ukrainian decolonization and statehood and a return for Russia to Muscovy of the 16th century? In this sense the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 can be understood as a continuation of the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 and tsarist empire in 1917. It proves a reality test that demonstrates the Potemkin nature of Putin's regime. The return to past glory – Tsar Alexander I in Paris in 1814, Stalin in Berlin in 1945 - highlights Russia's failure to develop a modernization paradigm for this century. Given Russia's society is atomized and lacks subjectivity and subject to state media propaganda, public attitudes and fluid and malleable and can react to changing circumstances.

- **Geopolitical outcomes**: Does the Kremlin seek to dominate and dissolve Ukraine and/or does it imagine it fights World War III against the US/NATO and collective West and for a "new global order"? Does it just seek to remake order in Europe or also global order? Russian failure implies the dissolution of the Putin imperial doctrine, the sense of status it projects and leads to the reformation of Putin's regime and Russia's political system. Ukrainian success implies Ukrainian identity consolidates around an EU agenda, which not only geo-strategically anchors Ukraine but provides a means of holding elected officials accountable. The Ukrainian diaspora's presence in the EU promotes "shadow integration." Ukraine's military becomes one of the most capable (battle hardened) in Europe, more interoperable with NATO and better able to be integrated. In this sense, Ukraine's "shadow integration" into NATO is an ongoing process.

Session 6: Russia's "Strategic South"

- **Turkey** views its neighbourhood (Libya, Syria, Black Sea, South Caucasus, and Central Asia) as a series of interconnected and interlinked spaces in which it vies for influence with Russia. While Turkey's strategic thinkers aim to gradually counterbalance Russia through soft power influence (trade, infrastructure development, and educational/cultural tools), there are interest groups that are aligned with Moscow commercially and by shared anti-Western sentiments. Political and security links deepened following Russia's entry in to Syria in 2015 and the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey. Russia has been able to co-opt segments of Ankara, particularly using propaganda that played on anti-western sentiments and economic enticements, to drive a wedge between Turkey and the West. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 changed the Black Sea naval balance and the plight of Crimean Tartars. While Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine in 2022 places pressure on Turkey's balancing the West with Russia, it also elevated Turkey's strategic importance for both Russia and the West. The war provided President Erdogan with an alibi for Turkish economic performance and raised the prospect of Turkey as a potential mediator. However, neither Turkey's ideological leanings (nationalism or political Islam) nor its interest are aligned with Russia's, and there are concerns held by a range of state institutions about Russia's influence in Turkey, as well as Russia's role in conflicts which encircle Turkey.
- **Central Asia**: Turkey's increased activism in Central Asia, not least its upgrading of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) which cuts across and potentially could challenge Russia's EEU and CSTO and increased bilateral meetings, provides a new type of threat to Russian interests. If in the 1990s pan-Turkic sentiment in the region was buttressed by business cultural and educational links and networks (in these ideational terms Turkey

represents a threat that China does not), in the 2020s Turkish political and military engagement (arms sales in general and effective demonstrative support for Azerbaijan) challenges Russia's monopoly of these agendas. Turkey does not project as political model ("Islamist democracy") in Central Asia, but rather provides a model of how a personalist regime, with an open society and connections to global markets can manage geopolitical relations. Turkey is a hub for regional trade and supports the "middle corridor" from China through Central Asia and across the Caspian to the South Caucasus (an alternative to Russia's trans-Siberian supply routes) and upgrades transport infrastructure to that end. In Russia Turkey is viewed by nationalists as a historical existential competitor (Turkey also as a NATO proxy/agent), by ideologues as a potential Eurasian ally (Turkic-Slavic Union) and by pragmatic transactionalists as a difficult partner, but one Russia can do business with.

- **Middle East**: as the U.S. has stepped back from a more direct leadership and mediation role in this region, new types of direct partnerships and self-help linkages between states have emerged, as evidenced by the Abraham Accords. At the same time, drivers of political violence are increasing, even as dynastic and autocratic regimes in the region uphold the status quo. Because of its historic support for many states in the Middle East, Russia still exerts influence politically and militarily, through direct intervention (Syria and Libya), or through its arms sales. This has resulted in the hedging behavior of most Arab states when it comes to condemning Russia for the Ukraine invasion or complying with Western demands to balance the oil market. Because of a complex landscape with cross-cutting loyalties and dependencies between autocratic rulers, states, and proxies, Russia can still leverage the region's vulnerabilities to exert influence (Idlib refuges for Turkey, for example). However, Russia's clout in the region is diminishing and its tactical strength weakening as Russia withdraws military *material* to focus on Ukraine, which could create a dangerous vacuum that regional rivals (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey) and other global actors, like China, can exploit. It may also lead to more positive developments and collaboration within the new security framework of a combined Abraham Accords-CENTCOM structure.

Session 7: Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons and Russian Deterrence in Practice?

- **Declaratory Doctrine**: Russia has a number of non-strategic weapons and dual use systems (estimated at 1900/2000), designed to balance the US/NATO's conventional advantage. Russia is prepared to inflict unacceptable damage and cost in defense of "Russia and allies" by forceful nuclear demonstration for deterrence and intimidation purposes in a conventional conflict as part of escalation control (what some call 'escalate to de-escalate') and potentially use "non-strategic nuclear weapons." Russia's nuclear doctrine states that Russia can use nuclear weapons if under nuclear attack or if a conventional threat poses an existential threat against the Russian state. Known unknowns abound around when local conflict is deemed to have moved to regional, the necessary level of conventional combat ineffectiveness, and potential signaling and miscalculation, before nuclear first use is triggered. Russia's nuclear doctrine is not a straight-jacket and the doctrine itself recognizes that Russia's political and military leadership have flexibility and can act pragmatically in any given context.
- **Deeds in Practice**: Given the scale of the conflict in Ukraine, non-strategic nuclear weapons, which are currently in over a dozen storage sites in Russia (including

Belgorod), are not suitable for counter-force or counter-value targeting. Russia has not exercised naval, air, and ballistic missile delivery systems or options and its arsenal of high precision munitions is exhausted. Since 1991, Russia lacks practical experience of handling nuclear weapons. It has not carried out preparatory nuclear testing or "nuclearized" its conventional forces. This raises the possibilities of human error, mishandling at the delivery, arming or firing stages. Will the munitions explode? Will orders be obeyed? How to prevent a single strike becoming a series of strikes? Russia's response to Ukraine's last breakthrough appears to be further mobilization, and this mitigates the risk of vertical escalation. But what will be its response to the next Ukrainian break through?

- **Implications and Potential Responses**: To prevent "vertical escalation," deterrence by punishment consequences would have to be conveyed clearly to President Putin. Prime Minister Modi or President Xi may be effective interlocutors, but Xi is unlikely to accept that role unless China's core national interest was at stake. Given its history Japan could communicate the consequences, or nuclear weapons states, given the morality implications. A punishing western (U.S.-led) response could be conventional not nuclear, and military strikes that would target Russian conventional assets (for example, air, sea, and land blockade of Kaliningrad, the elimination of all Russian naval assets wherever they may be) and that the consequences will be very personal. (This would all lead to escalation but not as directly as direct attacks on Russian forces in Russia would). Sanctions would be part of a deterrence by punishment response and emergency aid to Ukraine would feature. Self-deterrence (Russia assuming pariah status) would not be a factor in Russian thinking. Russian nuclear threats and even more, nuclear use, as well as another NATO-hostile U.S. President, would induce the Europeans to engage in sovereignty-sensitive strategic-level discussions about an independent European nuclear deterrent. Such initiatives could include expanding France or the UK's nuclear umbrella, European nuclear sharing, a missile shield, but no EU command if the EU is not a state (fear of a collapse of the NPT). The need for a European bomb could gain traction, while arms control talk could lose momentum, given Russia is unwilling to negotiate sub-strategic weapons.

Session 8: Roundtable: Russian Regime Stability – Alternative Outcomes and Implications?

- **Misunderstandings:** If there is a general tendency in the West to overestimate Russia and underestimate Ukraine, in Russia it is to over-interpret the role of the West, and misunderstand or discount the thinking, identity, and the right to agency of elites and society in Ukraine, as well as other neighbors. For China, Xi's "Russia complex" is challenged. Xi understands that he is powerful because China is powerful, but hitherto saw Putin as intelligent, decisive, manipulative, and powerful, even as Russia was weak. This selective bias in Xi's judgement about Russia's national power has led China to overestimate Russia's strengths and reliability, while underestimating its weaknesses and the risks its behavior poses to China. If on 4 February 2022 it appeared that the world was bipolar, split between Russia-China and the U.S. and allies, by September 2022 Russia appears over-stretched and in imperial retreat.
- **Prior Assumptions**: Some assumptions highlighted in prior SCSS virtual seminars are validated. The greatest risks Putin takes appear to be those that address threats to his

personal reputation, legacy, and imagined "destiny" as a strong leader. Putin equates existential threat to his regime to Russia itself ("No Putin, no Russia" doctrine). Putin is willing to take greater risks to preserve what he imagines he has (Ukraine). The irreducible core of Russian "victory" - holding onto Crimea, incorporating Donetsk and Luhansk to 23 February 2022 line of contact into Russia (restoration of the territorial status quo ante plus annexation) - has yet to be breached.

- **New Behavior:** Rather than using one conflict to leverage presence into another and military escalation to generate new opportunities to negotiate from a position of strength, and reach an outcome that can be spun as a victory – the Ukraine war appears have the opposite effect. The one Ukraine conflict reduces Russia's presence elsewhere ("horizontal de-escalation"?). Rather than creating new opportunities, it backs Putin into a corner. To avoid defeat or vertical escalation, Putin banks on: 1) the effective and timely mobilization of 300,000 men into the Russian military; 2) a severe winter in the West turning western public opinion; and 3) an exhausted Ukrainian military incapable of mounting further advances. The gap between propaganda ("victory" through restoration of imperial territory and heritage) and reality (Ukraine posed for further advances) widens. Momentum is lost, timelines are dashed and options become existential: defeat or nuclear escalation. Putin is driven by events over which he has little control: changing Chinese perceptions of his power and credibility, the Alla Pugacheva "blast from the past" sentiments which resonates with his Soviet nostalgia support base within the electorate, a more vocal, kleptocratic and opportunistic "party of war" within Russia (Kadyrov, Malofeev, Prigozhin) and a military and *Rosgvardiya* which feels betrayed. As a result, Putin's irritation and frustration gives way to fear.
- **Plausible implausibility**: The current situation is very fluid and difficult to forecast, hinging on the physical state of one person – Putin. Our thoughts regarding what might constitute the plausibly implausible or at least unpredictable future tipping and turning points included:
    - Sudden death of Putin or *coup* against Putin, followed by chaotic regime change, a Russian civil war and Belarus' implosion;
    - Breakdown of U.S. bipartisan pro-Ukraine support and consensus (November 2022 Congressional elections and/or November 2024 presidential);
    - China invades Taiwan – simultaneity of crises forces prioritization;
    - Fracturing of European EU/NATO member state support and unity;
    - Crisis of Ukrainian cohesion, resilience and morale leading to a chaotic failed state;
    - Catastrophic Ukrainian success – Crimea as a bridge too far or carry on successful counter-offensive into Russia?

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