

THE CLOCK TOWER SECURITY SERIES



FY23 SCSS#1, 18 October 2022 Roundtable “Alternative Ukrainian Future Trajectories: Implications for Russia and the West”

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Introduction

This year our Strategic Competition Seminar Series (FY23 SCSS) activities will focus on the theme of alternative Ukrainian future trajectories and the implications these may have for Russia and the West. The Roundtable held on October 18th, 2022, examines three aspects of the puzzle: Russia’s vertical escalation potential, prospects of Russian regime change, and Ukrainian intelligence covert action.

Russian Nuclear Escalation Potential

Russia has undertaken mobilization, annexation, created a new ‘joint force’ in Belarus (all aspects of ‘horizontal escalation’), and attacked Ukrainian critical national infrastructure. Putin states that 220,000 ‘mobiks’ have so far been mobilized, with 16,000 already deployed to the occupied territories in combat units. Kremlin predictive thinking is that these measures will enable Russia to stabilize its front lines over Winter. This stabilization creates the conditions for the insertion of even more mobilized and trained troops into Ukraine in the Spring, allowing Russia to launch counter-offensives and be victorious. The need for vertical escalation is negated by this winning strategy, though its threat is designed to intimidate the West into pressuring Ukraine to negotiate a settlement on Russia’s terms.

This predictive thinking can be questioned. Russia commits a dual blunder: it annexes territory it does not fully control and mobilizes troops its military cannot absorb/process. In this sense, Russian “forced mobilization” does not immediately boost Russia’s conventional capability. In the short term, rather than consolidation, the cohesion of Russian combat units may decrease. Inter-ethnic tensions (Belgorod shooting) within the Russian military are exposed. The joint grouping in Belarus is not meant for warfighting (it lacks offensive capability) but is designed to increase the length of the front that Ukraine must worry about. Attacks on Ukrainian CNI will have an impact in winter but do not materially change the military situation.



Over the longer term the presence of mobilized troops boosts Russia's defensive capability and slows Ukrainian advances, increasing the time Ukraine takes to retake territory and blunting break-through potential. By March 2023 troops being trained now will have a greater utility and numbers count. However, in the context of autumn 2022 rather than spring 2023, a sudden large and damaging Ukrainian breakthrough on the 'Kherson front,' where retreat is not possible, increases the possibility of a Russian military rout. Ukrainian troops "at the gates of Sevastopol" is a less likely scenario over the next month. Nonetheless, in either case, panic in the Russian military leads to large scale desertion, surrender, and mutiny in the Russian military. Panic in the Kremlin may lead to Russian vertical escalation. Already one component of the Russian nuclear triad – strategic bombers – are in use in the war in Ukraine, and in principle conventional munitions can be exchanged for nuclear.

Several factors mitigate against nuclear use. Since 1991 Russia lacks practical experience of handling nuclear weapons. This raises the possibilities of human error, mishandling at the delivery, arming, or firing stages. Will the munitions explode? Will orders be obeyed? Russia has not brought non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapons out of its 12 storage sites, nor has it carried out preparatory nuclear testing (for example, a land or air-based test above Novaya Zemlya) or "nuclearized" its conventional forces. For these reasons, Russian vertical escalation probability is tied to the speed and scale of Ukrainian advances and the effects of the shock of Russian predictive thinking shattering.

Prospects of Regime Change in Russia

Russia cannot win against Ukraine if the West continues current levels of support and Putin cannot admit defeat, regardless of Ukraine taking back occupied territory. When victory is not possible and defeat not an option, we can expect a prolonged conflict. Russia will pressure the West to pressure Ukraine and at the same time make the war felt throughout Ukraine through drone and missile attacks. Under such conditions, how likely is regime change in Russia?

"Not very" is the short answer: organized opposition in Russia is destroyed or imprisoned, the regime increases repression, and letting those who do not want to fight leave acts a safety valve, allowing Russia to maintain internal pressure at acceptable levels. Elite splits within Russia are highly unlikely even if losses continue – public divisions that have occurred so far are focused on avoiding blame for setbacks rather than questioning the whole rationale for war or moving to depose Putin. For the elite and their own cost/benefit calculus, the risks of regime defection are still much greater than maintaining the status quo. Lenin noted that societal revolt is only possible when elites are dissatisfied and divided. According to this logic, stable contemporary Russian elites and limited protest potential means stable society. If elites and society are stable, then the logic of Western discussions about how Putin must entertain vertical escalate to avoid defeat, because defeat leads inexorably to regime change, need to be reassessed. No need therefore for vertical escalation.

Though a sudden coup/collapse of the regime is unlikely, it cannot be ruled out. The elites are prepared to be in the "party of a long war" but not the "party of defeat." A Kherson breakthrough might change the calculus. If societal attitudes change from apathy to opposition to the war, the security state is less able to respond, given forces like *Rosgvardiya* are partially deployed to Ukraine, and those remaining are locally recruited and perhaps reluctant to turn on their home

towns. Leaderships can bubble forth and grievances or resentments do not have to be political and directly war focused. Economic hardship in Russian mono-industrial towns could be a source of grievance, resentment, and protest. The dynamic of pre-emptive purging by the elite in the context of no opposition and the need to assign blame after military setbacks may become a factor.

Although unlikely, if Putin is removed or dies, this is likely to be a “good thing.” Western commentators fear of what comes after Putin is misguided. There is a lot of uncertainty to be sure, but we know that Putin in power is destabilizing. The most likely scenario if Putin goes is internal jockeying for position in new collective leadership order, which in turn assumes a managed intra-elite power transition, as occurred after the death of Stalin in 1953 or after Khrushchev was deposed in 1964. Collective leadership entails coalition building, a move from the extremes to the center and consensus. Internal consolidation is likely to distract Russia from external fight.

Ukrainian Intelligence Covert Action

Since the summer, the focus has been on the Ukrainian counteroffensive and changes on the battlefield. But there is also a growing parallel war fought by Ukrainian Special Forces and intelligence agencies behind Russian lines in the occupied territories and within the Russian Federation. These attacks are characterized by a willingness to take greater risk than Western supporters may be comfortable with and expand horizontally the geography of the conflict. The Crimean bridge attack, for example, while boosting Ukrainian morale, also challenged Ukraine’s western partners’ appetite for risking escalation.

The performance of Ukraine’s domestic Security Service (SBU) has exceeded expectations, given its reputation prior to the war for under performance and Russian penetration. But it is Ukrainian Military Intelligence, the GUR, that has grabbed most of the headlines in recent months. Gen Kyrylo Budanov, its 36-year-old chief, oversees Ukrainian intelligence covert activities. Though it is difficult to assign exploits to specific intelligence agencies (as Russia denies in some cases that a covert action occurred or refuses to attribute them to Ukraine), the GUR appears responsible for high-risk, high-profile operations e.g. retaking Snake Island and resupplying Azovstal by helicopter under siege.

In the occupied territories, subversion is designed to destabilize Russian control while reasserting Ukraine’s control, and to set the agenda. Attacks in Crimea, including the Black Sea Fleet Naval HQ in Sevastopol on Russia’s Navy Day (26 July) and on Saki airfield and other air bases and ammunition dumps, as well as the Crimea bridge itself, has the effect of softening Russia’s red lines and reaffirming the political importance of Crimea as part of Ukraine. The spread of the war to the Russian Federation, particularly Kursk and Belgorod regions through attacks on transport and energy infrastructure suggests how the war may develop over the winter behind the lines, even if stalemated on the front lines. The car bomb attack against Darya Dugina on 20 August has been attributed to Ukraine by U.S. officials (although denied by Kyiv). It highlighted that Ukraine was willing and able to attack individuals inside Russia - including potentially Russian officials - and accept escalation risks in doing so.

While these attacks have served Ukraine’s political and military agendas, some high-risk operations have caused concern in western capitals. They are a reminder that Ukraine is willing to push its own sovereign agenda to determine the geography of the battlefield, work outside its

borders, and effectively disrupt the assumptions of Russia. But it is likely that risk assessments in Kyiv and Washington, DC differ, with Ukraine willing to take greater risk than its western partners, raising questions about future escalation management. The role of the intelligence services will impact the role of the ‘security-intelligence bloc’ within Ukraine. Effective covert action is aligned with a “Big Israel” potential alternative future trajectory for Ukraine.

Conclusions

Assessments offered suggest vertical escalation unlikely, but so too is Russian regime change. A prolonged war of attrition appears to be the default pathway, with conventional battles along the frontline, Ukrainian covert action in the occupied territories and Russia itself, and the threat of offensive action from Belarus. Russian nuclear rhetoric attempts to persuade the West to pressure Ukraine to accept Russian terms. A reconstituted Russian military comes out fighting in the spring of 2023.

We may see one more big push this month before weather conditions worsen. In Kherson, Luhansk, or both rather than Zaporizhzhia, as it is easier to try to break through in areas where Russian forces are less dug in than where lines have been stable for months. The rainy season gives reason for a temporary 1-2 month pause for maneuver warfare, which can begin again once the ground freezes, especially if it seems that Russian forces have supply problems with cold weather gear. If Ukrainians feel they are more comfortable fighting in cold than Russian forces, they could take advantage.

‘Attrition by drone and missile attack’ appears not to be breaking Ukraine’s will to resist, but rather uniting a nation in anger, bridging internal differences, and forging a more consolidated society. Brutal and indiscriminate Russian attacks against Ukrainian civilian population centers undercuts potential western ‘war fatigue,’ and maintains western financial and military support for Ukraine. Russia’s remaining military capability and its ability to reconstitute itself is not a given. Belarus’ role remains unresolved and uncertain. A sudden Ukrainian battlefield breakthrough could still constitute a game changer, pushing Russian society to oppose the war. Time is not neutral. Russia looks to surge again in the spring of 2023, but this is one year from an inflection point – Russia’s 2024 presidential election. Does Russia’s inability to secure a ‘victory’ become a defeat for Putin? And then what?

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