

THE CLOCK TOWER SECURITY SERIES



FY23 SCSS#4, 17 January 2023 “Ukrainian Victory!”

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Introduction

This year our Strategic Competition Seminar Series (FY23 SCSS) activities focus on the theme of alternative Ukrainian future trajectories and the implications these may have for Russia and the West. SCSS#3 concluded by noting that “while the conflict is ‘mutually hurting,’ a stalemate is not in evidence. A prolonged war of attrition by drone and missile attack may appear the default pathway, but it is not the only one. Putin has to escalate not to lose and Russian “victory-at-any-costs” rhetoric and targeting of cities and civilian infrastructure increases Ukraine’s will to resist and reject a ceasefire on Russian terms. Winter has not led to a strategic impasse. Fears of a grey-zone protracted inconclusive conflict characterized by operational exhaustion, war fatigue, and the rise of a ‘give peace a chance’ camp in Europe are not realized. Paradoxically, a high intensity fluid deadlock is in balance at break-point.” While there may be no prospect of peace talks this winter between Russia and Ukraine, there are talks about talks and talks about avoiding escalation. Looking out over 2023, how might evolving structural factors shape the interests that modify the decision-making calculus of the parties directly and indirectly involved in the armed conflict? What constitutes “victory?”

Ukrainian “Victory”

In an interview with the *Economist* on 3 December 2022, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Gen Valery Zaluzhny argued that Ukraine has the troops, but lacks military equipment, and needed 300 tanks, 600-700 infantry fighting vehicles, and 500 howitzers. Ukraine believes that the offensive mobility inherent in armored brigades will allow it to seize the initiative and create a viable and necessary military precondition for negotiation leading to war termination on its terms – the withdrawal of Russian troops from “all captured territories.” The upcoming 20 January 2023 Ramstein military assistance coordination meeting of allied defense ministers will highlight the extent to which western partners will supply equipment. Without further Ukrainian military advances, President Volodymyr Zelensky lacks a mandate to negotiate a peace deal.



In addition to this military track, President Zelensky offered a 10-Point Peace Plan and issued a call for a Ukrainian Peace Formula Summit, a proposal most recently presented by First Lady Olena Zelenska at the World Economic Forum in Davos on 17 January 2023. Kyiv insists that justice is a central concern, not a negotiating tactic. It reflects a historically-driven sense of victimhood under tsarist imperial and then Soviet control and the realities of forced Russification and the Holodomor and the ongoing war since 2014. Justice is also integral to the Ukraine's International Law-based approach to war. On 17 January 2023 Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba called on the European Parliament to support setting up a special tribunal to hold Russia's political and military leadership accountable for war crimes against Ukraine. Ukraine also seeks to establish a mechanism for compensatory reparations for damage Russia has inflicted on Ukraine and calls into question the legality of Russia's status as an UN P5 member. Punishing the perpetrator aims also to deter future aggression. Ukraine is now trying to build support globally for this approach.

Russia has lost 50% of the territory it had seized and occupied in the first 6 weeks of the war. Although Ukraine cities are dark and children are less visible, Ukraine's railways still run, its banking system operates, local produce is sold in the streets and macro-economic stability holds. Ukraine appears resilient and its people resolute. There is a perception in Ukraine that western assistance through 2022 gave Ukraine enough *materiel*, economic, and diplomatic support to resist Russian aggression but not enough to ensure Russia's defeat and to make Ukraine safer and more secure. This approach must change in 2023. Arguably, Ukraine's political culture is being transformed – not least through the activities of its anti-corruption agencies and support for a “rule of law” society - but the war and such change is necessary if Ukraine is to remain Ukraine (“plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose”). In 2022, the High Anti-Corruption Court transferred more than 1.22 billion UAH of pledges and seized assets to support the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Indeed, Western military assistance (equipment, training, doctrine) accelerates Ukraine's move to a 21st century NATO interoperable military, even as Russia's military descends to its late Soviet variant.

When examining debates in Ukraine around a preferred end state, we see a striking degree of unity amongst internal actors, in terms of message discipline and coherence. Slight differences in emphasis can be noted when surveying a range of internal actors, reflecting both an expectation of victory, and a desire to see that victory aligned with their institutional interests and aspirations. Gen Zaluzhny and Colonel-General Oleksandr Syrsky, Ukraine's second most senior soldier and C-in-C of its army, differ on the issue of the duration of the war, which is linked to war aims. Gen Zaluzhny points out that for Crimea to be militarily “in play,” Ukrainian forces would first have to advance around 100km into Russian lines to take Melitopol.

For the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), this is a “good war,” not least because it has pushed the overdue question of reform off the agenda, and their support for maximalist goals may in part reflect their interest in a longer war. This puts internal reform efforts on hold for the duration, an outcome that may align with the interests of mid-ranking Cols and LtCols in that service. By contrast, Ukraine's Ministry of Internal Affairs, headed by Denys Monastyrsky (who tragically died in a helicopter accident 18 January 2023), will at the point of war termination be responsible for the reintegration of occupied territories and will need to deploy the Police, National Guard, State Emergency Services, Border Guard, and State Migration service (customs service) to LNR,

DNR, and Crimea. A quicker war termination may align with less territory to reintegrate which in turn allows the Ministry to initiate reform efforts sooner.

For Ukraine, a minimally acceptable *starting point* for negotiation would be for Russia to be a return to the status quo ante 24 February 2022, with the territories seized in 2014 (DNR, LNR and Crimea) all on the table. Such an outcome is dependent on western military assistance. More controversially, Ukrainian “end state” discussions reflect on the need for a reformation of Russian political order to enable a “New Russia” to emerge. Ukraine recognizes that Putin’s world view is informed by the belief that the West is “coming” for him and is shaped by imperialist sphere of influence notions. Putin may strike a deal at some stage for survival, but he will not change his beliefs. Defeating Russia, though, might force Russia to deal with its imperial past. Discussions around the contours of a “New Russia” include the notion of Russia as a “Parliamentary Republic” (Khodokovsky) or even confederation, cuts in energy revenues that fuel the war and a decrease in its nuclear arsenal to mitigate the risks of further aggression. Nonetheless, it is questionable how far Ukraine and the West may be able to reshape Russia in any meaningful way.

Russian “Victory”

President Putin’s war aims have remained constant and continue to center on the destruction of Ukraine as an independent state capable of joining the EU or NATO, the breaking of the will of its people to resist and the will of the West to support it. As SCSS#3 noted: “Russia seems to believe that its aerial campaign against Ukraine combined with declining support from the West will eventually lead to talks on its terms, involving territorial concessions by Kyiv and the acceptance of constraints on a future Ukrainian state’s foreign, defense, and domestic politics. Broadly speaking, Russia sees time on its side and predicts that in 2023 it will be much harder to sustain financial support to Ukraine. Eventually, Ukraine will crack.”

Actual means to achieve Russian ends include: salami-slicing Ukrainian territory (Soledar and Bakhmut the current focus); the use of missile strikes to target Ukraine’s economy and cause population displacement and refugees; and, ultimately, forcefully assimilating Ukrainians into Putin’s artificial “one Russian people” construct. Putin places Russia on a war footing through mobilization of reservists, the Russian economy, and its society. ‘Wartime Putinism’ seeks to impose talks on Ukraine on Russia’s own terms. In Russia more generally, publicly broadcast notions of victory are maximalist and detached from reality. Real discussions center on what can be salvaged by this debacle and how defeat can be mitigated.

On 11 January 2023 Gen Sergey Surovikin was replaced as single unified commander of the Russia Group of Forces for the Special Military Operation (SVO) in Ukraine, becoming one of three deputies to Chief of the General Staff (CGS) Valery Gerasimov, who as well as SVO commander retained his CGS duties (suggesting a demotion for both). Surovikin is considered to have played a bad hand well, overseeing the “regrouping” of Russian forces from Kherson to more defensible lines on the left bank of the Dnipro, stabilizing the ‘Luhansk front,’ and addressing logistical and mobilization issues.

The Russian MoD and state-controlled media explained Gerasimov’s appointment as heralding a shift from “defensive” (“positional warfare”) to “offensive,” suggesting that the SVO could now



be expanded to include large-scale long-term “war.” Implied in the appointment is a Russian Spring Offensive. Realistically, by spring Gerasimov cannot address the systemic challenges that bedevil Russian military operations, including a largely incompetent officer corps, endemic corruption which emanates from the Kremlin, logistical, subordination, and coordination issues.

In theory the organizational prowess and vision of Gerasimov combined with the unsentimental battlefield brutality of Surovikin makes for a winning combination. In practice Gerasimov may be able to use his role as the CGS to flex his political strength, given his centrality to the Putin regime, by implementing controlled escalation. Non-strategic nuclear weapon escalation is very unlikely, unless Putin panics. Gerasimov’s escalatory options are ultimately political decisions. First, Belarus or the ‘northern front’ can be brought into play. Lukashenka currently gives all support – munitions, training, the use of Belarusian territory as a launch pad – short of committing his maximum of 9000 deployable troops into Ukraine (of the 48,000 in the Belarusian armed forces), aware that Belarusian society and its military would object. Second, more Russian reserves could be mobilized and/or Gerasimov could prioritize the deployment of better trained and equipped Russian conscripts over its “mobiks,” despite the reluctance of Russian society to sacrifice these “wards of the state.”

Another explanation offered for Gerasimov’s appointment is the need for Putin to restore a factional power balance and rests on the notion that a virtual open conflict is ongoing between the Defense Ministry, top political figures, and mercenary group commanders. In a regime where the presidency is the strongest institution presided over by a president-for-life, with no formal checks-and-balances, rule of law and accountability, factional infighting is driven by power (access to Putin) which in turn results in increased federal funding and the advantageous redistribution of property and profits. Gerasimov’s appointment could signify Putin’s desire to restore the primacy of MoD/GS authority over the “mercenary generals.” This in turn points to another less visible reality: Russia’s war in Ukraine is driven not by the logic of victory but of avoiding blame and responsibility for defeat. If this explanation has purchase, then might we not expect positive reporting of Wagner PMC in the Russian media to drop off and certainly Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner PMC’s leader, to desist from openly attacking the Shoigu and the GS. Time will tell with regards to the latter, but the Russian media from 15 January resumed positive reporting of Wagner’s effort in Ukraine. Prigozhin plays a necessary Zhirinovskyy-jester role in the Russian psycho-drama – a man without allies or a firm institutional basis is only able to secure Putin’s patronage only to the extent that he is military relevant. Hence the totemic importance of being seen to storm Bakhmut.

For Putin, if not for Russian ‘technocrats’ (where mere survival constitutes victory), the appearance of being “victorious” (“Grand Victory”) against the West matters perhaps even more than tactical “victory” on the battlefield in Ukraine. There are minimum preconditions though, that any Russian negotiated victory must meet if Putin is to justify the costs of the war. We can speculate that this includes not just consolidating existing territorial occupation but also seizing the rest of Donetsk region, including Kramatorsk and Sloviansk. The occupation of Donbas and a land corridor to Crimea represent Russian victory. Russia does not have the troop-to-task ratio to achieve anything else.



Putin views himself as a transformative leader, a commander-in-chief able in his New Year's Eve address to lay down the law and use the war in Ukraine to fundamentally reshape Russia. For Putin, ideal victory comes with a Yalta-II summit ('Grand Bargain') in which the United States and Russia negotiate as Great Powers the fate of Ukraine. Russia is acknowledged as a co-equal Great Power by a dignified foe (the United States), while it is able to dictate the fate of Ukraine within its sphere of influence. But might victory for Putin also be understood in terms of his legacy in transforming Russia, with or without victory in Ukraine? Russia's 2024 presidential election becomes the ritual consecration of Putin's historic mission and Russia's destiny, by this reading, not a stumbling block or check on Putin's power. The notion of a ticking time clock putting Putin under pressure is an illusion: Putin's ability to manufacture the reality of time by resetting the clock is in a sense the proof of the existence of God (Putin), at least in his mind.

Conclusions

It is clear that the incentives of parties have shifted over the last 11 months and that such shifts can open pathways for war termination through negotiation, though 2023 is likely to still be driven by military logic rather than diplomacy, especially as both sides prepare for offensives. In the balance is the Ukrainian desire for a sustainable war termination ("just peace") as set against the real risks of Russian military reconstitution and conflict sustainment. Security guarantees in the form of NATO membership may mitigate this risk, but even if such membership became largely symbolic (Ukraine is in effect already a de facto member of the NATO alliance), it would also constitute a strategic defeat for Russia. Ukraine's wider diplomatic effort centered on "unifying for peace" may also play a role in opening up new negotiation opportunities, for example, through the diplomatic engagement of China. These opportunities are currently missing and may be able to be used to exert indirect influence on involved parties to move closer to a sustainable conflict resolution.

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