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“Russia’s Strategic D b cle: Regime Stability, Military Reconstitution and Relations with Belarus?”

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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. In this session we use the notion of “strategic d b cle” to question the implications of Russia’s war of imperial aggression against Ukraine on the stability of Putin’s regime. What does the experience of war over the last year suggest about Russia’s ability to reconstitute its conventional combat capability? Are we likely to see military reform allowing for “build back better,” “build back late Soviet,” or “build back worse?” What of relations with Belarus? How has the war impacted Putin’s calculus towards its only ally and what are the prospects for a compensatory annexation?

Russian Regime Stability

Although the war in Ukraine cannot be characterized as the triumph of Putinism and an outright Russian victory, it is too early to state that the impact of Russia’s war of imperial choice will fundamentally reformat power in Russia. The maxim that suggested a “spillover effect” was in play was never realistic. Ukrainian pluralism, decentralization, electoral democracy, reform, and westwards strategic orientation would not act as a demonstration model for Russia. Historically these two societies have been different and are so today, especially so over the last 30 years, particularly since the 2004 “Orange Revolution.” Russia is more authoritarian and its society accepting of that fact. Putin may have started the war, but this is Russia’s war, supported as it is by 70% of its population. Opinion polls consistently show that 40% fully support the “Special Military Operation” (SVO), 30% give tacit support (rather support than not), and 35% of respondents will not support Putin undertaking ceasefire or peace negotiations, even if Putin decides this is the path he wants to follow. Defeat is not a catastrophe for the regime in that this regime will not agree to reparations, reform and/or regime change will not follow: Russia 2023 is more akin to Iraq under Saddam Hussein 1991-2003. The Serbia scenario, with Milosevic at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, is not plausible.



The crucible of war has not led to culmination or break point but rather elites have pledged allegiance and loyalty to Putin and society (“upward mobility”) has consolidated and the economy functions and performs much better than expected. Russia has lost perhaps 3-4% of its GDP and the effects of sanctions in 2023 will be greater than 2022. But Russians survived the economic crisis of 1991-92 and the systemic shock of 1998 and, this time, Russia does not have foreign loans and its informal (“garage”) economy is resilient, though some economic sectors (such as automobile production) are hit harder than others. A culture of poverty, subsistence, fatalism, and patience (a tolerance for suffering) is encouraged by the state. Russia can survive economically at a lower level for decades.

Putin’s Federal Assembly address on 21 February 2023 demonstrates that Putin has achieved the chaos he promised to unleash. His aides called upon him to be the “generator of entropy” and this is precisely the environment he has carefully constructed over the last two decades, with societal supports. To give one example, the Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow, once its top-rated university and a hub of globalization, now builds campuses in Donetsk and Luhansk, fully embracing the reality of occupation. Militarism is promoted through propaganda and theatrics, such as the Immortal Regiment, the Victory Temple, and other quasi-sacred symbolic rituals that celebrate Russia is a nation at war. As war generates resentments and new legends around “fallen heroes,” it becomes normalized, woven into family history, just as Putin wove the “Great Patriotic War” into his own personal biography. “Putinism” is now distilled to its essence - “war Putinism” - a condition that brings stability and an organizing logic and dynamic to his regime. Does a ceasefire or, worse still following this logic, a peace treaty with Ukraine, entail Russian internal instability, perhaps even regime implosion? For Russia, war is peace, peace is war?

Moreover, while Russia is more isolated from the ‘political West’ (1bn people – the “golden billion” in Putin’s understanding), it uses narratives of anti-colonialism (despite clearly imperial actions regarding Ukraine and “historical Rus”) and anti-Americanism to appeal to the ‘Global South’ (Africa, Latin and South America, China). Russia suggests that it is in the global vanguard of upholding the sovereignty of states, sovereign equality and the right to choose their own systems of governance. This is Putin’s world. Outreach to the ‘Global South’ gives external legitimacy to and acknowledgement of Russian Great Power status. In this perverse narrative the defeat of Ukraine is the defeat of the United States and so of colonialism: the wrongs of the West in the past are righted by Russia in the present.

Russia represents a classic case of imperial overstretch, a fact perhaps unsurprising when one considers that Russia constitutes 2% of global GDP and the political West supporting Ukraine 40% of global GDP. Russia’s perimeters are currently bare as “everything to the front” is the order of the day. The UK’s MoD reports that 90% of Russian border troops are deployed to Ukraine. The Pacific Fleet’s Marine Infantry Brigade has been reconstituted three times. Troops on the Finish border and Arctic are rotated through the “SVO.” Russia does not have the capacity to police the empire, staff the garrisons, or patrol the borders. Russia was and remains a loosely organized patchwork filled with empty spaces. In the future, Russia could resemble more a number of large cities loosely connected by highways. However, this looseness does not translate into an impetus for reform as Russia does not face strategic competition in Eurasia. As the problem of imperial overstretch is perennial, inertia, not reform rules.

Putin's regime has developed a raft of sophisticated soft management tools to control society. Society can be "retuned" through propaganda, as the era of *glasnost* and *perestroika* demonstrated when hope and imagination combined. However, there is a limit. Putin can use propaganda to explain defeat as victory – he can appeal to and amplify what people want to hear - but it cannot be used to impose on Russian society new and alien narratives such as "defeat is actually defeat."

Russia's Military Combat Capability Reconstitution

General Milley has stated that for Russia this war is a strategic, operational, and tactical failure. Is this the case? The use of the term "débâcle" is entirely correct when applied to the military-strategic context. The war has proved high intensity, has lasted a year rather than three days, and shows no signs of exhausting itself. The Russian military is failing to learn from its mistakes, being unable to undertake a frank and honest analysis over what went wrong. Defense Minister Shoigu, Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov, and General Staff itself are "learning backwards," falling back to analog Soviet habits. The Ukrainian military is already more digitalized/computerized and with willing recruits able to "learn forward." The quality of Russia's newly mobilized precludes the use of technology, even if Russia had it.

Reforming the military in a war is challenging. There is an inherent tension between what the war demands and what society can supply. Russia needs a larger military, and can use every and all means to recruit, but where do the recruits come from? Russia faces long-term negative underlying demographic trends (every year's draft cycle yields less and less), the under-reported effects of COVID, war casualties, and mass out-migration to avoid conscription. Extending the duration of servicemen is probably the only viable solution. In addition, military security may be strengthened with a larger military (quantity not quality) but this can impact societal cohesion and increase economic costs, both to the military budget and by creating labor supply shortfalls elsewhere.

Another lesson to be learned from this war is that airpower remains decisive. Russia is not able to achieve "air superiority" let alone "air supremacy." Russia and Ukraine fly approximately the same number of daily sorties (one or two dozen), despite the fact that Russia has reported destroying the Ukrainian air force many times over. How to explain this underperformance? Russia argues that it does not fight Ukrainians in Ukraine but the collective west in Ukraine. A looming kinetic war with NATO is predicted and so through prudence and pragmatism, Russia holds back airframes for the larger war to come. More to the point, Russia's Defense Industrial Complex lacks key component parts and critical supply chains are broken. In addition, modern warfare demands real time targeting, an ability that HIMARS clearly demonstrates. This in turn rests on good intelligence, communication and functioning satellite constellation, areas where Russia is deficient. A bureaucratic rigid military means that 48-72 hours may pass between the acquisition of intelligence and actual attack. In short, Russia cannot connect its air to ground forces and its airpower cannot give sufficient air support to enable the Black Sea Fleet to launch opposed amphibious operations against, for example, Odessa.

Lastly, Russia has invested heavily in its nuclear forces. These expensive systems can be used for nuclear blackmail. Putin's speech on 21 February announced Russia's suspension from START II and the resumption of nuclear testing. On 22 February Medvedev again suggests

Russia will countenance nuclear first use if defeated conventionally in Ukraine. By suggesting a willingness to use nuclear weapons, Putin signals his commitment to winning the war in Ukraine at ever-increasing costs. But aside from this signaling function, these weapons are impotent. If signaling is the only function, then Russia could achieve the same results with less weapons, remembering that one nuclear submarine is the equivalent of ten combined arms battalion tactical groups.

Until 2022, there was the perception that Russia was overtaking the west in warfighting capabilities. Why did this not end up being true? Why is the Ukrainian military learning much more effectively than the Russian? What makes the difference? Prior to the war, it appeared Russia was learning from expeditionary coalitional warfare (Syria) while the Ukrainian army had essentially confined itself to trench warfare since 2014 along a line of contact in occupied Donbas, fighting with old Soviet equipment. But in reality, prior to 24 February 2022 the Russia military had not fought a regular military since 1945. It ran on reputation and so could punch above its weight. Many analysts failed to understand the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a harbinger and had forgotten that Prince Potemkin was also a Russian general. Military culture plays a role. Russia's military structures are hierarchical and vertical, Ukraine's more decentralized, networked, with horizontal linkages. The quality of recruits, leadership, morale, and training (the intangibles) appears critical. The lack of modernization in Russia, particularly societal modernization and a retrograde backward-looking political culture which viewed reform, change and the new as inherently destabilizing. While Russia replaces its weapons systems with older and more outdated equipment, the Ukrainian military receives a huge variety of increasingly more modern weaponry and its army learns everything rapidly.

Whereas one might expect communication between Russian soldiers and the society from which they came to generate pressure to root out corruption and inefficiency, this is not the case. Inefficiency is a cultural norm and so expected. Veterans and others exposed to the horrors of the war do not typically share the pain they experience or wish to rejoin "for my buddies." In trench or positional warfare, there are no communication links between Russians and Ukrainians, so TV propaganda labelling Ukrainians as Nazi becomes the default perception. Russian society largely sits within their own echo chamber, heavily influenced by state propaganda. The 11 million Russians with Ukrainian relatives do not act as a communication bridge to the larger Russian population. But knowledge of a war that is going very wrong is spreading through social networks. This is invisible to the Russian government as it fails to understand how social networks work.

Relations with Belarus

Putin's calculus before Russia's invasion of Ukraine was that Russia did not need the formal annexation of Belarus to have territorial, political, and military control of Belarus. Putin achieves this control through President Lukashenka, an instrument in Putin's hands, one that knows where the red lines are and does what is needed and required when push comes to shove. Lukashenka enjoys the status of being Putin's only ally and each March, year after year, Belarus votes in UN General Assembly against Ukrainian territorial integrity. What does Russia really require? Not the 9,000 deployable Belarusian military but use of Belarusian territory. Russia has achieved this prime objective without the risks of possible elite splits replacing Lukashenka would entail. Lukashenka's regime is personalistic and so dependent on Lukashenka the person. Another



challenge: which narrative could be deployed in Russia to explain to the Russian people the sudden need of a forced succession in brotherly Slavic “one people” Belarus? The sudden rise of Belarusian Nazis?

In addition, whatever the political loyalty or opposition to Lukashenka, Belarusians can all agree that participation in the war should not be countenanced. The historical memory of the “Great Patriotic War” in Belarus is different than in Russia. In Belarus it is remembered as a war of suffering, of victims, death and destruction not as one of unity, triumph and victory. Belarusians do not harbor imperialist sentiment or an imperial complex, but are comfortable in their territory. Belarusian society knows Europe, constituting the largest number of Schengen visitors on a per capita basis in the post-Soviet space. The demonization of the EU does not have as great a purchase and traction as it does in Russia. This consensus and the “audience costs” factor - the fear of mismanaging a post-Lukashenka’s Belarus, preserves some autonomy and generates the alibi: “I would love to send troops but it will trigger an uprising.” The notion that Belarus’ annexation could occur as a consolidation prize or compensation for defeat in Ukraine is not viable for the same reason. Putin’s plan for Belarus’ integration into Russia is not on the basis of the Union State construct but rather each of its six regions would agree to “voluntary accession” and be integrated separately. Belarus’ integration as a single entity would make it too distinct and indigestible whereas individual *oblast* entry breaks its historical identity. Ultimately though, Russian annexation of Belarus is a distraction that detracts from the ‘problem’ of Ukraine. As long as Ukraine fights, Belarus has a chance to uphold its statehood (territorial integrity and sovereignty).

Conclusions

Russia is overstretched but not at break point. The single point of strategic failure for Ukraine is not political will or societal cohesion, but that it depends on external rather than indigenous sources of arms to maintain the fight. For Russia, the single point of strategic failure is Putin’s health: the medieval idea of the political body of the nation being invested in the physical body of the tsar is resurrected. Contemporary Russian political order is physically invested in Putin’s body: “No Putin no Russia” is not just a sycophant’s slogan. The degradation of Russian analytical and forecasting abilities means Russia knows less about Ukraine and the West and this increases the risk of more mistakes and miscalculation. To mitigate the risks of uncertainty and unpredictability, analysts must widen the cone of analysis.

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