

# THE CLOCK TOWER SECURITY SERIES



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*“What If?”*

*Russian Variables, Inflection Points, and Game Changers*

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## ***Introduction***

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#8 attends to the impact of Russia’s war of imperial aggression on Ukraine on Russia itself.

## ***Narrative Matters***

U.S. stakeholders have attempted to shift the narrative over the war’s duration in the context of Ukraine’s slowly unfolding counter-offensive. The assumption is that it will result in a ceasefire leading to negotiations and then sustainable strategic stability and that European partners (Germany, France, and the UK) will step up and give additional support to arming Ukraine. Shifting the narrative over war duration seeks to diminish it as an issue in the U.S. presidential election campaign in 2024.

However, expectations are too high and pay too little attention to Russian military adaptation and learning over the last year: Russia has readied itself for a long war. They also downplay intra-European divisions over the role of the EU and NATO in collective security and crisis management in the neighborhood. In addition, there is no clear consensus over “when” (and in some cases “if”), Ukraine should gain NATO membership, despite ongoing “creeping” integration via interoperability and training and, ultimately, no clear security guarantee alternative to NATO membership.

President Putin’s calculus is that the longer the war lasts, the less Western resolve to support Ukraine and so the greater pressure on Ukraine for a ceasefire (effectively one on Russian terms). A protracted war, such thinking goes, exposes tensions between Western elites willing to offer Ukraine reassurance and western societies willing to link rising living

standards and lower energy prices to war termination at any price. Russian disinformation operations can and do accelerate such splits.

Countries in the “Global South” may condemn Russia’s invasion but do not support Western sanctions. In line with Russian propaganda, Russia is not understood to be an imperial or colonial power but rather one that resists U.S. influence in the world. Such sentiments are partly influenced by the perception of U.S. global withdrawal in recent years, a diminution in Western soft power, Russia’s growing presence in resultant security vacuums, and China’s systematic engagement with these countries. President Biden’s “democracy vs autocracy” black-and-white narrative does not acknowledge the reality of a “hedging middle” in a fragmented and nuanced world.

Russia’s own main narrative is that its regime has stabilized. Society and elites have converged and consolidated, not fractured. The regime can calibrate fear and repression, curtail or grant personal mobility, and project via propaganda the patina of stability and the hopelessness of instability. This narrative suggests Russia has sufficient resources to sustain itself, sanctions are ineffective, and that as there is no chance to change Russia’s strategic behavior, there is no option but to negotiate.

Russia can spin all outcomes short of military-political strategic defeat in Ukraine as a “debatable victory” - “we took what we needed to take and now we are holding the line.” If Putin remains president, battlefield defeat will be understood as “regrouping.” Even in the case of Ukrainian victory, Russia will argue that this outcome represents the “triumph of the hegemon.” Russia was right but lost: “we took on the west and we lost because they dominate and are too powerful.”

Losing in Ukraine allows Russia to address the larger threat – the “hegemonic colonial West” - at a global level and quietly reconstitute to retake Ukraine. “We fought the good fight but lost” narrative is dangerous as it stores up trouble for the future by suggesting Russia won the “moral argument,” but only lost the first round of the war. The perceived benefits of ceasefire, armistice, and peace treaty all remain out of reach until Russia can reconstitute its combat capability and returns to negotiate from a position of some strength. Putin and his propaganda apparatus can work to explain why Russia lost and why Russians should not feel bad about it. The “stab in the back” myth will rest on a seductive populist notion that “Russia lost” because it was defeated by the foolishness and corruption of its own elites, elites that only held Russia back. Prigozhin’s power is rooted in his ability to channel and parrot such populist sentiment. Such narratives set the stage for “restoration.”

Over the longer term though, Russia’s 2023 in Ukraine may be akin to Britain and 1956 (Suez) or France in 1962 (Algeria). That is to say, in 2023 Russia is forced to confront its imperial past. In this year of reckoning, Russia like Britain and France before it, shifts from imperial mindset to “end of empire” mentality. Russia gradually accepts that it no longer has the resources or the capacity to have global influence as an imperial player. Other alternative narratives include “triumph of the people/narod” alongside the “failure of Putinism” and the Putin model.

What is not clear is how Russia’s war of imperial aggression against Ukraine and its outcome and aftermath impact Russia and other post-Soviet countries. From a Russian perspective, a post-Soviet shift has occurred: Central Asia and the South Caucasus have become more

important, if only to circumvent sanctions and develop new trade routes and they are more present. This shift reflects a weakened Russia, but one that is paying more attention and is more involved in Eurasia. The West needs to be more involved in these regions too.

The public personae of Wagner PMC head Prigozhin and Chechen President Kadyrov exist within a social media bubble. Rather than being powerful in the system, they are in fact weakening. They attract media attention and in doing so distract and obscure the importance of other key players with much greater resources and staying power. Russia becomes more and more a black box, a hall of mirrors, a regime within which perception and reality merge towards mirage. Any tracking of trends must accept this reality.

The West needs to invest in better information policy and create a coherent and compelling narrative identifying a Ukrainian “theory of victory” based on sustainment in a protracted conflict. Such a narrative can argue that the costs of support are high but the costs will be higher if sustainment fails and Ukraine does not prevail. In a narrative conflict the need for narrative control is paramount.

### ***Perspectives on Russia***

Optimism about Russia and its prospects demands a long-term perspective. Russia’s development trajectory in the mid- and long term will be influenced by its current brain drain (“the best and the brightest”), its disastrous demographic developments, relative technological backwardness, and the degeneration of society and elites, who become less dynamic, more insular, more anti-Western, and more China-dependent. Whether Ukraine is a part of NATO or apart from NATO, Russia will be central to Ukraine’s long-term security in either case. A democratic, stable, and prosperous Russia is Ukraine’s ultimate security guarantee. In reality, three key variables or possibilities may determine how Russia evolves and emerges, and all revolve around the issue of war termination. Assuming the war does end - how does it?

Might it end in “Russian victory?” If so, this least likely option would suggest “victory” is redefined down, towards a minimalist definition. Nonetheless, declaration of “Russian victory” consolidates Putin and his regime’s imperial venture and at the same time ensures a semi-permanent breach with the West. If rather the outcome is “Ukrainian victory” - Ukraine defeats Russia on the battlefield and regains its 1991 borders - will Russia as a threat be neutralized in practical terms? Do guarantees come in terms of treaty or agreement? Just as it is unclear who defines victory, only the loser decides when it is defeated, particularly if that “loser” is Russia.

Even as Putin attempts to hold back the tides of time (Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, humiliated by marginalization, is not allowed to retire at 72), elite succession has already begun. Lavrov aside, the generation of 68-72-year-old former KGB operatives are midwives to a new younger generation of klepto-technocratic manager-administrators, who gradually replace the older coterie around Putin. They are pragmatists more focused on personal wealth than aged ideologues invested in Russian glory, but equally as hostile to the West as Putin. Their gradual ascent is more a guarantor of policy continuity than change. Ideological and military indoctrination of Russia’s youth, with an education policy overseen by First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration Sergei Kiriyenko, is ensuring generational hostility to the West.

Two figures are characteristic of this generation: Alexei Dyumin, Governor of Tula Region and a decorated former Presidential Protective Service officer, and Deputy Prime Minister for Construction Marat Khusnullin. Dyumin maintains ties to the security services but represents Tula in Moscow more than Moscow in Tula. Khusnullin oversees the lucrative task of restoring infrastructure in the occupied territories and is able to funnel contracts to companies in Tatarstan, but maintains good relations with the Rotenberg brothers and Gennady Timchenko in Putin's inner circle as well as Moscow Mayor Sobyenin. Both Dyumin and Khusnullin highlight the growing influence of regional elite figures and their networks, a gradual rise that slowly erodes and eats into the interests of the inner presidential circle.

What will be Western reaction to Russia's defeat? Is there an offer that is not Versailles ("stab in the back") or Munich (concessions understood as appeasement inviting further conquest)? How to modulate and balance the need for retribution and reparations with desired outcomes over time: Russia's reintegration into Euro-Atlantic space? What incentive is there for Russia to address its responsibilities? With sanctions still in place, long-term economic scarring will be serious. Post-Putin Russia will be characterized by greater regionalism, as failure will be more associated with Moscow. Different regions will demand more from Moscow and if more is not forthcoming, they will steal from it. China's role in this context – one that optimizes benefits for China – will be critical.

Cracks in the system leading to palace coup or revolution have not occurred and the West's ability to influence Russia through cooperative public diplomacy or coercive sanctions appear much less than supposed. Elites can reconcile corruption and bank accounts in the West with holding power and propagating an anti-Western narrative: incongruity in ideals and action are not self-evident. Putin's regime leaves only space for supporters of the regime - there is no grey space or scope for non-alignment, let alone neutrality or resistance. The most progressive and liberal part of society has left the country. The Russian opposition and surviving elements in its civil society are divided and no major emerging actor is focused on regime change.

It is clear that Russia has socialized the West over the last 30 years more than the West has socialized Russia: normative transfer by osmosis has not worked. Western policy failures in the 1990s are evident. Propaganda and repression locks in Russian elites and society around beliefs of the state as savior and the enduring status of Russia's imperial past and legacy into the present. The ideal of a free and democratic Russia was suspended when the West acquiesced in both the storming of the Supreme Soviet in October 1993 and the falsifications of Yeltsin's second term presidential election in 1996. Short-term opportunistic fixes and expedients designed to stabilize Russia helped generate cynicism inside of Russia and enable interest groups that were inherently autocratic to create a Russia which now exports instability to its neighbors. An "anti-fragile" Russia needs external friction to manage its elites and society as it is vulnerable to tranquility.

Russia appears resilient and stable, more so than the Soviet Union, but is it in fact unbending but brittle? *Rosgvardia* social media chat-rooms highlight unhappiness and a heightened sense of risk in Russia. What type of systemic crisis might trigger change: Russian military culmination in Ukraine? A rolling economic crisis? Putin becomes incapacitated or dies? The need to evade blame and responsibility for the evident failures of Russia's "special military operation" creates a destabilizing dynamic: "national patriots" must identify and scapegoat

“national traitors” – the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> columnist (a 6<sup>th</sup> columnist is a 5<sup>th</sup> columnist who is unaware of the “fact”) who are still alive and malevolent in Putin’s Russia. Given non-systemic opposition are in prison or dead and Russia’s so-called “systemic opposition” are irrelevant regime placemen and loyalists, the stage is set for intra-elite conflict. Narrative control, framing, and agenda setting goes to first mover: getting one’s retaliation in first is a must in Putin’s winner-takes-all system.

In military, economic, and demographic terms, a defeated Russia is inevitably a much weaker adversary than it was on February 23, 2022. Western investment in deterrent capabilities will be less costly than if the conflict remains protracted, frozen, leads to a negotiated settlement, or Ukraine’s defeat. A weaker Russia is not necessarily synonymous with a weak Russia. Russia can be a spoiler able to impact its neighbors, though with less resources and degraded set of capabilities. Russia’s capacity and will to reconstitute its conventional combat capability after Putin is a “known unknown.” The loser decides when it has lost. If Russia is militarily defeated in Ukraine, it will only be when the hybrid phase of the conflict ends that Russia acknowledges this defeat.

### ***Conclusion***

What kind of Russia do we want to integrate? Ukraine as the victim of Russian aggression can identify what it considers to be an acceptable Russian end state, within the bounds of what is possible. Just as we need a theory of victory for Ukraine, we also need a theory for managing Russia’s defeat. We need to have a long-term vision and long-term policy that acknowledges that without fixing Russia, we cannot fix Ukraine. Until Russian society addresses its own responsibility for its invasion and admits collective fault and the reality of its toxic imperial past, society will not support an alternative to Putin. One beacon of hope may be the Russian diaspora who are better able to redefine their understanding of Russia’s imperial past and elaborate an alternative post-imperial future.

The political West can define the conditions under which it is prepared to engage with Russia, aware of the emerging trade-offs and strategic dilemmas. If we build a Euro-Atlantic system fit for purpose, then it must exclude and contain Russia, conditioned on Russia changing its strategic behavior. A different Russia can be gradually reintegrated into Euro-Atlantic space. This process at best will take two generations, that is, 30 years. The West’s offer is gradual integration in return for standards compliance and behavioral changes. An excluded and rejected Russia will enable revanchist post-Putin elites to stoke feelings of resentment, anger, and revenge in society. To avoid this, we may build a Euro-Atlantic system that includes Russia in the hope of encouraging future behavioral change. If so, then the system will not be fit for purpose. Western policy risks floundering between the Scylla of inevitable Russian resentment and the Charybdis of appeasement.

There is no strategic blueprint that has charted the likely contours of Russia’s end state and its implications, let alone identified which policy mix would promote the most desirable outcome and mitigate against the worst. Mapping is needed to allow us to choose the least bad options available and navigate between the inevitable trade-offs, back lashes, and disappointments, as well as embrace emergent opportunities, learn from the last 30 years of engagement, and value strategic patience.

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