

Conflict Update # 187

September 19th, 2022

Back issues at www.accgroupco.com

Conflict Assessment

Russian losses – 54,650 (+170) soldiers killed, 2,212 (+2) enemy tanks, 4,720 (+19) armored combat vehicles, 1,313 (+4) artillery systems, 312 (+0) MLRS systems, 168 (+0) air defense systems, 251 (+0) warplanes, 217 (+0) helicopters, 920 (+2) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 238 (+25) cruise missiles, 15 (+0) warships/cutters, 3,581 (+3) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers, 76 fuel bowsers and 125 (+11) units of specialized equipment.

Key takeaways

Ukraine's counteroffensive traps Russian forces against Dnipro River - Ukraine troops have reportedly trapped Russian forces against the Dnipro River amid their counteroffensive to take back occupied territory in the south, according to a Ukrainian official.

Some Russian troops have found themselves "sandwiched" between Ukrainian forces and the Dnipro River, Nataliya Humenyuk, who serves as the head of the joint press center of Ukrainian Defense Forces of the South, said during an appearance on the Ukrainian parliament's television channel on Monday.

Ukraine's Armed Forces take control of Luhansk region village Bilohorivka - Village Bilohorivka, Luhansk region, has been cleared out and has passed under the complete control of Ukraine's Armed Forces, said the Luhansk region administration head Serhiy Haidai.

"Luhansk's Bilohorivka has been cleared out and is now under the complete control of Ukraine's Armed Forces. We should all have patience while we wait for the full-scale deoccupation of the Luhansk region. This process will be way more complicated than the situation in the Kharkiv region. There will be a difficult fight for every cm of Luhansk's land," he wrote in a post on his Telegram channel.

Russia has lost four combat jets in Ukraine in last 10 days, UK says - Russia has lost at least four combat jets in Ukraine within the last 10 days, taking its attrition to about 55 since the beginning of its invasion, the British military said on Monday.

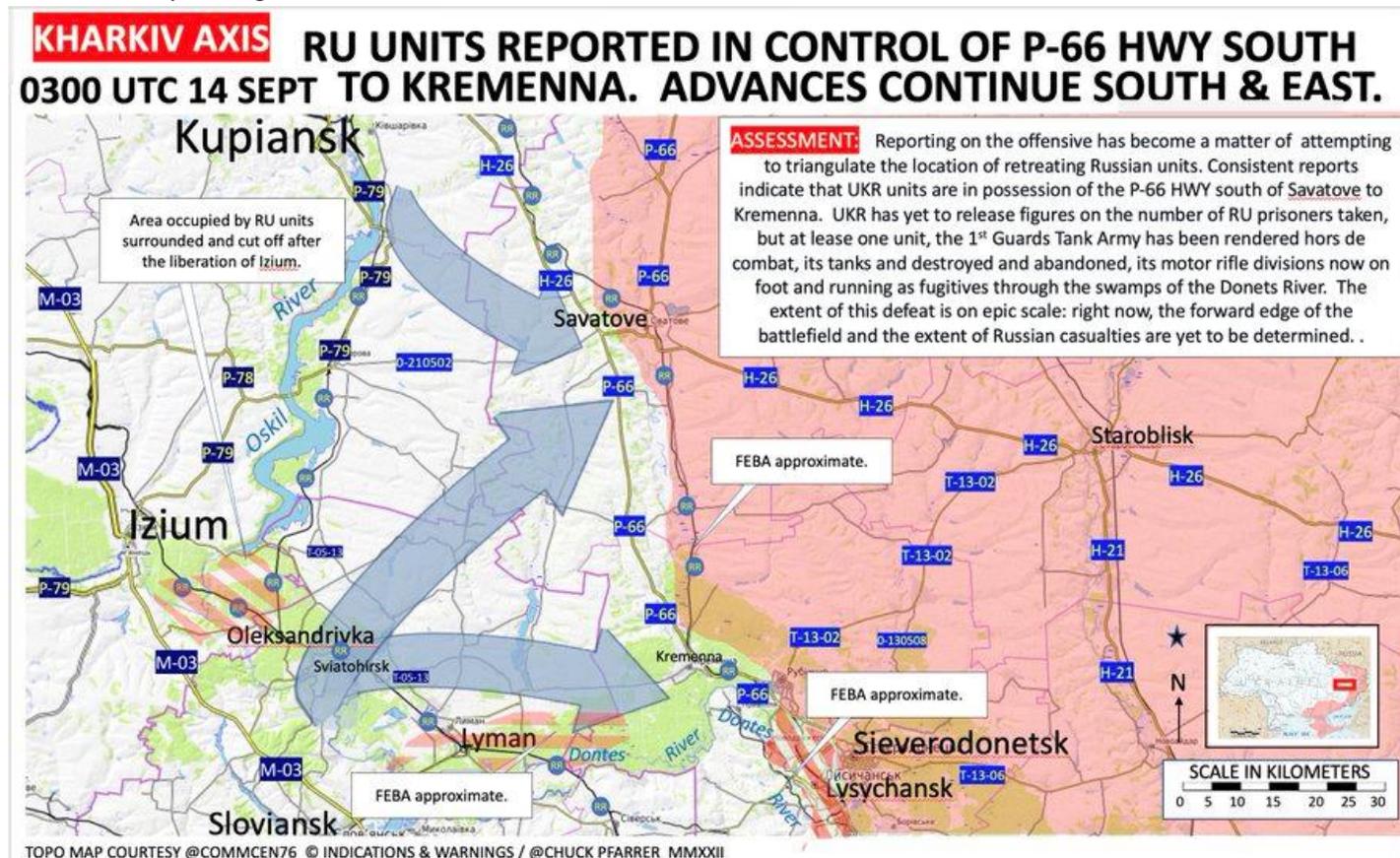
Putin's army and air force are getting killed in Ukraine - The Russian invasion of Ukraine continues to go poorly for Moscow on day 208 as the Ukrainian military continues to advance in the east and the south, liberating towns and settlements. The Ukrainian military is also making gains in the eastern part of the Donbas.

The rate of Russian casualties has slowed down from the deadly pace of the past two weeks. This is primarily attributable to the withdrawal of Russian forces who fled the Oblast battlefields. However, that doesn't mean that the Russian military has solved its serious force generation issues. Moscow continues to lack sufficient troops to man its frontline units increasingly and adequately has to jeopardize its positions in one part of the battlefield to bolster another.

The Russian Aerospace Forces continue to be one of the great mysteries of the war. Russian pilots have failed to achieve air superiority over the Ukrainian skies despite their numerical and technological advances.

And Russian aircraft continue to suffer casualties as the Ukrainian air defenses are getting stronger.

“There is a realistic possibility that this uptick in losses is partially a result of the Russian Air Force accepting greater risk as it attempts to provide close air support to Russian ground forces under pressure from Ukrainian advances,” the British Military Intelligence assessed in its latest estimate on the conflict.



Ukraine has yet to release figures on the number of RU prisoners taken, but at least one unit, the 1st Guards Tank Army has been rendered hors de combat, defeated and disarmed, this unit numbers more than 10K men. The extent of this defeat is epic.

Russia can't even think of advancing in Ukraine anymore, commander says - Alexander Khodakovsky, a Kremlin-backed commander and former political leader in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) in eastern Ukraine, suggested Monday that the Ukrainians' successful counteroffensive in Kharkiv last week has left Russia's troops unable to advance.

In a post on his Telegram channel, Khodakovsky, a commander for the pro-Russian Vostok Battalion, said Ukraine continues transferring its soldiers and equipment in preparation for additional offensives in such a way that prevents Russian President Vladimir Putin's troops from even considering advancing themselves.

"The past week passed without significant changes on the front line, but the relative stability should not mislead anyone," Khodakovsky wrote. "The enemy is preparing, transferring forces and equipment, and accumulating resources."

In the city of Kurakhove in the eastern Donetsk region, Ukraine is regularly unloading trains with equipment and personnel, he said, adding that the Pokrovsk area "is almost not far behind in this regard."

"An interesting technique: they achieved success in one direction, brought us to a state where we do not think about any offensive in this direction, only about stabilizing the front line, and offensive surpluses are transferred to another sector," the commander said.

The successful Kharkiv counteroffensive launched by Ukraine in early September saw it recapture swathes of its territory in days.

"A developed transport infrastructure allows them to maneuver with limited forces, creating accumulations in places where it is necessary according to the plan, and the presence of a plan and success in its implementation is the possession of a strategic initiative," Khodakovsky added.

Khodakovsky said during Ukraine's counteroffensive efforts that he was "depressed by the results of this stage of the war" and that Russia's war efforts have been "sloppy."

The commander said that a lack of manpower is a more minor issue for Russia, and that his unit sometimes has difficulty locating Ukrainian troops in combat and does not have sufficient equipment.

"I have fewer people than I would like—but the main difficulty I have is not in this, but in the fact that sometimes I cannot find the enemy's positions from which they are hitting us," Khodakovsky said. "If suddenly I can, then I don't have enough range to fire at them, or I don't have enough ammo."

The Kremlin has rejected allegations that Russian forces committed war crimes in Ukraine's Kharkiv province as a "lie"

Russia hints it could shoot down SpaceX Starlink satellites - The number of satellites orbiting Earth has increased dramatically in recent years, but Russia says some of those objects could become military targets if the US and its allies don't change course. The veiled threat doesn't call out Elon Musk's SpaceX by name, but Russian officials can only be referring to Starlink, which has provided connectivity in Ukraine during the Russian invasion. But is this just more saber-rattling from a country attempting to save face?

Early in the invasion, SpaceX pledged to activate Starlink service in Ukraine, and it came through. Starlink has provided an important line of communication for Ukraine, as well as helping to control military assets like drones. Attacking Starlink's constellation is not outside Russia's abilities, but it would be a significant escalation of tensions with the west. Russia tested an anti-satellite (ASAT) missile in late 2021, turning a derelict satellite into a cloud of dangerous debris. NASA and other space agencies condemned the test because of the increased danger to the International Space Station. Even small fragments can cause serious damage in orbit, which is one reason the US is seeking to ban orbital weapon tests.

According to Konstantin Vorontsov of the Russian Foreign Ministry, "quasi-civilian infrastructure may become a legitimate target for retaliation." Moscow has been shamed on the world stage following its botched invasion of Ukraine, which was supposed to be a "special operation" that wrapped up in a few days. Instead, Ukraine forced Russia to abandon its siege of Kyiv and continues to push its troops back toward the border.

Even if Russia threw caution to the wind and started picking off Starlink satellites, it's unlikely it could do much to damage the network. There are over 2,000 of them in orbit, and every Falcon 9 launch can add up to 60 more. SpaceX CEO Elon Musk has noted that it can launch new satellites faster than Russia (or anyone else) can shoot them down. And SpaceX is just the first to reach this point. The reusable Falcon 9 rocket makes it much cheaper to get satellites into orbit, but reusable launch vehicles will eventually become commonplace. This could lead to a new generation of ASAT technology, but the current method of shooting a missile at a single satellite is little more than a nuisance.

Ukraine finds one of Russia's best tanks abandoned in 'perfect condition' - Ukrainian forces found one of Russia's most advanced tanks in "perfect condition" abandoned in the eastern Kharkiv region, where a counteroffensive by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's army has reportedly forced Russian soldiers to flee.

Ukraine's Defense Ministry announced the discovery on Twitter on Sunday and shared pictures of the T-90M tank that was emblazoned on one side with a white "Z," a symbol that represents pro-invasion sentiments. The T-90M is the latest version of the Russian T-90 main battle tank.



"We ask its owner(s) to contact the #UAArmy. Please identify yourself by a sign: a white flag," the ministry wrote.

Ukraine's discovery of the T-90M in good condition could spell additional trouble for Moscow since it would add to the thousands of tanks that Ukraine estimates Russia has lost overall in the more than six months of war. The General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine said in an update on Monday on Facebook that 2,212 Russian tanks had been eliminated since the war began on February 24.

But Ukraine finding the tank in good condition, rather than destroyed, now gives the war-torn country the opportunity to use it against its invaders, though the Ukrainian Defense Ministry did not say if it intended to do so.

Struggling to fill out its ranks in Ukraine war, Russia resorts to 'illegal' regional mobilization - By all accounts except the Kremlin's, Russia is struggling with military manpower shortages as its invasion of Ukraine continues in its seventh month.

Moscow, though, has shied away from declaring war and mobilizing its full military reserves, most likely out of fear of the domestic political consequences that could arise from sending men from urban areas or the professional classes into combat. Instead, Russia has relied largely on contract soldiers recruited from remote and impoverished regions.

On September 15, a video emerged appearing to show Kremlin-connected businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin recruiting mercenaries to fight in Ukraine at a Russian prison. Prisoner-rights groups in Russia believe some 10,000 convicts have already been shipped out to fight in Ukraine.

According to an analysis by the U.S.-based Institute for the Study of War on September 15, the Kremlin is "doubling down" on its stealth mobilization in the wake of a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive that sent Russian forces reeling in the northeastern Kharkiv region.

Within two days of Kadyrov's message, at least four other Russian regional leaders endorsed the idea. One of them was the head of the mid-Volga Republic of Mari El, Yury Zaitsev. Mari El is one of Russia's poorest regions and has already sent three battalions of volunteers to Ukraine. The prison where the purported video of Prigozhin recruiting prisoners was shot was also located there.

However, under Russian law, the idea of regions carrying out their own individual military mobilizations is clearly illegal, said Sergei Krivenko, the head of the Citizen.Army.Law nongovernmental aid organization.

"Any mobilization or the formation of separate military units outside the Defense Ministry or the National Guard should be impossible and illegal," he added. "But, of course, it is possible, but it is illegal."

Ukrainian nuclear operator Enerhoatom accused Russian troops of striking the Pivdennoukrayinska nuclear power plant in the southern Mykolayiv region but said none of its three reactors had been damaged.

Oskil River breached - Ukraine's military said its troops had established a bridgehead over the Oskil River in their counteroffensive in the northeastern Kharkiv region. Experts suggest the foothold on the Oskil could threaten Russian troops in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.

Russia bombarding Ukrainian civilian targets - Britain's Defense Ministry said Russia has intensified and widened attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure after Moscow suffered battlefield setbacks as part of Kyiv's counteroffensive in the east and south of the country.

Ukraine is using mine-rolling tanks to ram Russian armored vehicles - Amidst the chaos of mechanized warfare on a fluid battlefield, it's not uncommon for specialized units to have to adapt to combat roles for which they weren't intended. In such situations, it can pay to get creative.

Such was the case of an unusual engagement on September 9, documented with photos and video footage posted on the social media site Telegram during Ukraine's Kharkiv counteroffensive—a battle in which a minesweeping tank without a cannon apparently defeated a Russian BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicle using seemingly medieval methods.



According to a post on the Ukrainian military blog NIP Tysk one of the Ukrainian columns pressing southeast towards Izyum on the M03 highway was spearheaded by a specially modified T-64A tank equipped with a minesweeper, a variant informally dubbed the BMR-64, after the BMR-2 and BMR-3 Soviet mine-rolling tanks.

Ukrainian sappers used the vehicle to ram Russian tanks.

Putin

Putin Discovers the Limits of Comrade Xi's Friendship - In his first meeting with his Chinese counterpart since the invasion of Ukraine, Russia's leader got mostly hot air.

There were "no limits" to their bonds, declared the leaders of Russia and China earlier this year. More than six months, one messy invasion and a plethora of Western sanctions later, it turns out that perhaps there were a few. The slogan didn't even appear to surface in the comments by Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian leader Vladimir Putin at their encounter on Thursday in Central Asia.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China has been in an uncomfortable spot, attempting to balance its ideological alignment with Moscow with an act of aggression by Putin that violates Chinese diplomacy's cardinal principles of territorial integrity and non-interference. In Uzbekistan, meeting the Russian president for the first time since February, Xi showed clearly that he has no plans to resolve that ambiguity in Putin's favor. Russia's leader could have done with a few more strong words and a lot more economic support. He got little more than the bare minimum.

Putin's next move in Ukraine - mobilize, retreat, or something in between? - For the first time in the war in Ukraine, Putin must contend with the serious prospect of losing it. Early setbacks around Kyiv and Chernigov had been balanced by Russian gains in the south and the east; they could be justified as tactical retreats and thus as Russian choices, regardless of whether they truly were.

By contrast, the near rout of Russian soldiers in the Kharkiv region on September 10—and the rapid reconquest by Ukrainian forces of territory spanning some 2,000 square miles in the east and south—clearly showed that Ukraine was on top and that Russian troops may continue to fall to future such offensives.

Ukraine's Kharkiv offensive destroyed the illusion of Russian invincibility. It has also heralded a new stage in the West's expectations. Suddenly, Western leaders and strategists have been able to contemplate Ukraine gaining the upper hand in this war. This shift in perspective seems certain to unleash a new dynamic of military support for Ukraine. The argument that Ukraine should sue for peace, rather than keep fighting, has been refuted.

But the perspective has changed most dramatically for Russia, and this entails significant new risks for both Ukraine and the West. Since the failure of his lightning strike to take Kyiv in February 2022, Putin has been keeping two balls in the air. One is sustaining the war for the long term with a peacetime Russian army, having surmised that Ukraine's military is weaker and that a prolonged war favors Russia. The other ensuring that Russian society remains insulated from the war, on the assumption that Putin can maintain high levels of domestic support as long as ordinary Russians are not exposed to the war's costs. Ukraine's battlefield successes around Kharkiv, however, have dramatically upset these calculations.

Putin is now confronted with a set of harsh choices. He can keep Russia's military commitment limited, maintaining current troop levels and continuing to insulate Russian society, or he can order a mass mobilization. Either option poses a serious threat to Putin's legitimacy. In choosing the former, Putin will give up the prospect of Russian victory and run the risk of outright defeat. Already, the nationalist pro-war forces he has released have become more and more dissatisfied with the conduct of the war. They had been promised land and glory in a rapid campaign. Instead, they have received a staggering death toll for minor territorial advances, which now look increasingly precarious. Continuing the status quo could create dangerous new fissures in Putin's regime.

Mobilization, on the other hand, would radically upset the Kremlin's careful management of the war at home. Dramatically increasing Russia's manpower might seem a logical choice for a country with a population that is three times the size of Ukraine's, but the war's popularity has depended on it being far away. Even the Russian terminology for the war, the "special military operation," has been a hedge, an obfuscation. Despite the Kremlin's rhetoric of "denazification," for the Russian population the Ukraine war is entirely unlike the direct, existential struggle that Russia endured in World War II. By announcing a mobilization, the Kremlin would risk domestic opposition to a war that most Russians are unprepared to fight.

Of course, he may choose neither of these options. He may seek to change the war by finding a middle way between full mobilization and continuing the status quo. Though he is a self-styled man of action, Putin tends to be indecisive when the stakes are high, preferring to step into situations without ever resolving them.

In 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, Russia moved into eastern Ukraine, signed a diplomatic agreement, and then dithered for years, neither advancing nor retreating. In Syria, Russia made its move in 2015, backing up Bashar al-Assad militarily and turning the tide in his favor. But Syria remains up in the air, with a political solution to the war entirely out of sight.

Putin has damaged his regime not just by opening his military to setbacks around Kharkiv but by matching extravagant political aims in Ukraine to meager and inefficiently marshaled means. In Ukraine, any of the options now confronting him will have significant consequences. Whatever his next move, Europe and the United States should continue supplying the Ukrainian army with the tools it needs most to stay on the offensive.

But they must also consider more far-reaching implications for a regime that might be facing growing pressure at home while it seeks new ways to inflict maximum pain on Ukraine and its allies. For Putin, desperate times will not call for reasoned measures.

An imperial call to battle

A decision by Putin to mobilize the Russian population, to institute a draft and to call hundreds of thousands of new soldiers, would raise stark new challenges for both Russia and the West. Even if only partial, a Kremlin-ordered mobilization would amount to a full recognition that the country is at war. It would also make that war existential for Russia. Until now, the invasion of Ukraine has not even been presented as a war to most of the Russian population. It has been termed a military operation, which has in practice been a war of choice built on delusional overconfidence and false assumptions about Ukraine and about Ukraine's allies and partners. With mobilization, however, Russia would be publicly investing itself in a major war. Choice would be transformed into necessity and the "special operation" into a war that all Russians would need to fight and win. Such a decision would probably make a defeat unacceptable for the Russian leadership, rendering the prospect of a negotiated outcome even more unlikely.

This course would be risky for Putin. Russia's military performance to date hardly suggests that throwing more soldiers into the fight would yield better results for Moscow. In addition, training soldiers would take time, and Russia will need to provide a commensurate increase in military equipment. At the same time, by bringing in many Russians who have no interest in fighting, mobilization could exacerbate rather than resolve problems of morale for the Russian army. Above all, whether full or partial, a mobilization does not necessarily mean victory for Russia. Mobilization would need to be tied to achievable strategic ends.

In pursuing mobilization, Putin would have to address these military perils while keeping on board those militarist and nationalist constituencies that have been empowered by the war and that would certainly welcome this move. The military peril is one of timing. In addition to receiving adequate training, new recruits would need to be integrated into fighting units, which would take many months—at a time when Russia's officer corps is tied up at the front and whose members have already been dying in high numbers.

And with each passing month, as a Putin-ordered mobilization gets underway, arms and assistance will be pouring into Ukraine and the Ukrainian military will be consolidating its strength. If Russia tries to wait out the winter and to launch a new offensive in the spring with fresh forces, it would be against a country that is much more prepared, and battle hardened than it was in February 2022.

For Putin, however, maintaining broad domestic support during mobilization could prove equally difficult. From the Kremlin's perspective, during the first six months of the war, Putin got his domestic politics right. In the absence of a general mobilization, the Kremlin's true believers and Russian nationalists could still thrill to a war of conquest, to a settling of scores with the West.

As for the many Russians who initially had no animus against Ukraine and were taken aback by the war, many of them, with the Kremlin's active encouragement, could simply ignore what was happening. For them, it was a special operation that should be left to the specialists. Mobilization, however, would render it impossible to keep the war out of the daily life of urban Russians. Having been schooled in disengagement from politics by the Putin regime, they would now have to be mobilized emotionally. They would have to accept that their fathers, brothers, and sons could die in battle. Demanding such a large-scale shift in attitude from the Russian population could easily backfire for Putin.

Mobilization would not solve the flawed logic of the war. Doubling down on a strategic mistake doubles the mistake.

Mobilization as such would do nothing to minimize the essential strategic miscalculation of Putin's decision to launch the invasion. It would not reverse the many ways in which the war runs counter to Russian economic and security interests.

In this regard, the political dilemma Putin faces about mobilization relates directly to the nature of the war. Historically, Russia has proved a formidable adversary when attacked by outside forces: both Napoleon and Hitler underestimated the depth and resolve of Russian forces when they chose to invade Russia.

But like the United States and many other countries, Russia has struggled with wars of choice. The Russo-Japanese war of 1905—which began when diplomacy over Korea broke down and which Tsar Nicholas II prolonged for the sake of Russian honor—ended badly for Moscow.

So did the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. (And in both cases, the wars unfolded without the added pressures of mass mobilization.) In contrast to rallying the public for a war of national defense, mobilization in the name of an ill-conceived imperial project is a recipe for domestic political unrest. It is better to have a foolish small war than a foolish big war.

For Ukraine and the West, a Russian mobilization would be a psychological shock at first. The weaknesses of the Russian army will continue to benefit Ukraine, but a mobilization would signal a renewed resolve by Russian leadership to stave off defeat at any cost—even the cost of domestic support. If Putin goes all in, the West will have to once again assess his state of mind and the potential for major military escalation.

Pulling back and prolonging

Another option available to Putin is some form of retreat. In choosing this path, he will have to give up on the prospect of a genuine victory. He could seek to keep the war going, reducing commitments to the minimum needed to hold the territory already gained in the east and south. He could return to his 2014 approach to eastern Ukraine—keeping occupied territory under Russian control but without advances, thereby destabilizing the entire country—but with a much greater Russian military presence.

Giving up on victory, however, will mean halting offensive operations. Putin will never admit that he is giving up. He will suggest that the war will escalate later, that his designs on Ukraine have not changed, that his claim on success will derive from his strategic patience. He will have to rely on Russians' desire to go about their lives unperturbed by a continual state of war. For this, Russia will need to maintain enough of a stalemate in eastern Ukraine for Russians to go on ignoring the war. That may or may not be achievable given Ukraine's recent gains. Going forward, Kyiv will do everything it can not to furnish Russia with a politically convenient stalemate.

For Putin, faced with dramatic Russian military setbacks, it will be no easy task to sell military inaction to the Russian public. Until now, the Kremlin has relied on the myth of his army's invincibility and the narrative of a defensive war to fuel support for the "special operation."

Over time, however, a stalled venture, much reduced in ambition, might expose the futility of a war that has already resulted in an estimated 70,000 to 80,000 and more Russian dead and wounded. Even if the current figure is not widely known in Russia, more and more families will be affected by the war. Such a venture will also leave Russia's military and security apparatus increasingly under attack for their failure to deliver the promised victory. Some of their members will be thirsting for another chance—perhaps with another leader.

At the same time, in seeking to maintain a stalemate, Putin will have to reckon with Ukrainian forces that are not standing still. Ukraine's prowess will continue to grow with more and better weapon deliveries. Under Zelensky's leadership, Ukrainians want to win this war. Any serious miscalculation by Russia could lead to another devastating defeat, which might be definitive. Ukraine has every incentive not to allow Russia to dig in, though the slow progress of Ukraine's counteroffensive around Kherson shows that not every offensive move of Ukraine's will necessarily be as successful as the recent one around Kharkiv.

Dirtier and more dangerous

Given the domestic risks associated with both mobilization and retreat, Putin may well try to find a middle way. For Ukraine and the West, this option would be less dangerous than a full mobilization but still a serious challenge in the

next months and years. Searching for new ways to prosecute the war without the risks of mobilization, Putin could have several courses of action.

He might try to muddle through with covert mobilization—forcibly recruiting volunteers, conscripts, and Wagner mercenaries, such as prisoners from Russian penal colonies. He might unleash new acts of terror against the Ukrainian population, for example by hitting critical infrastructure, such as energy and water supplies, to break the will of the population as winter approaches.

He might also increase attacks on essential civilian targets, such as hospitals and schools, and resort to uglier attacks, such as thermobaric weapons, which have a devastating effect on their surroundings. In short, he can try to repeat the extreme tactics that he used in Syria. At the same time, to shore up his support, Putin might find new ways to repress dissent and prosecute “traitors” at home.

Choosing this middle way would be typical of Putin’s indecisiveness in tense situations. Instead of an announced mobilization, he can use modest new resources to achieve small successes against Ukraine in areas where Russia’s position is strongest. He can also wreak havoc in parts of Ukraine that are not directly exposed to fighting, by attacking critical infrastructure, disrupting any sense of normality across Ukraine, and doing what he can to block U.S. and European efforts to assist in reconstruction. In doing so, he will attempt to preserve the atmosphere of danger that has haunted Ukraine since February 2022. If he has trouble controlling the narrative at home, since this was once a war that Russia was supposed to win easily, he can use force to crush dissent. For this, his government is well equipped.

This middle way will require resolve and patience from the West. Putin will bet on dwindling support for Ukraine from Europe and the West as they struggle with an energy crisis throughout at least the coming winter. An increasingly brutal war in Ukraine could lead to more calls to end hostilities regardless of the conditions imposed on Ukraine. Even if European countries do not pressure Kyiv explicitly, they might limit the military support with the argument that their own stocks and economic capabilities are overstretched. Ukraine’s successes in the Kharkiv region will postpone this kind of war fatigue for a while. But it is unclear whether Ukraine can repeat its success and the morale boost that it gave to its own population and Western audiences.

Western patience, a Russian precipice

For both Ukraine and its Western allies, it would be preferable for Russia not to mobilize. A better outcome is for Putin to give up on the prospect of victory. But the means for influencing Putin’s choices are limited. One is to maintain the status quo, in which the provision of weapons and intelligence have helped the Ukrainian military prosper.

Ukrainians have already proved that their political system is durable enough to sustain the war effort. They have already proved that they have excellent fighting ability and capable military leadership. The coupling of these internal strengths with the sophisticated weaponry the West is increasingly prepared to supply intimidated Russian soldiers around Kharkiv.

Whether it has also intimidated the Kremlin is anyone’s guess, but the Kremlin can only ignore Ukraine’s growing military strength for so long. The greater this strength, the less Russia can accomplish in Ukraine. Day by day, Ukraine is acquiring deterrent power.

Given this emerging reality, the West can hope that Putin might internalize the logic of Russia’s limits and of Ukraine’s capacities. In the best case, he would accept the tactical and strategic setbacks that began in early September not in apocalyptic terms but as the outcome of military choices that will define the scope and aims of eventual negotiations.

Ukraine has significantly improved its negotiation position in recent days and weeks. Russia has not yet acknowledged the changed balance of power nor yet toned down its demands, but it might benefit from doing so in the future, when confronted with the war’s rapidly diminishing returns.

Were Putin to give up on victory by giving up on offensive operations, even if—as is likely—he refuses to negotiate, it would be a partial victory for Ukraine and a partial victory for the West. As such it might seem unsatisfying. Relative to where Ukraine was on February 24, 2022, however, it would be a superb outcome.

If Russia does mobilize, Ukraine and the West must stay calm and build on the successes of the past seven months. Putin's Russia has been unable to develop a clear concept for its war, unable to learn from its mistakes, and unable to execute many of the functions of a world-class military. Mobilization per se would change none of this. The greatest dangers of mobilization might well relate to Russia more than to Ukraine. Russians might resist mobilization, in which case the regime would start to crumble, as the tsarist government did in 1917. Or Russia might well be defeated after a full mobilization, a debacle Putin will not survive.

Beyond Kremlin walls, this might sound like a happy ending, but a collapsed Russia would also upend the international system as we know it and lead to instability well beyond its borders. Nobody can predict what kind of regime might follow the collapse of a Putinist state in Russia.

As they wait for Putin's response to Ukraine's successes, whatever it will be, the US and the EU should keep providing Ukraine with the support it needs to stay in the fight and, most of all, to remain on the offensive. At the same time, Germany and France can use telephone diplomacy, despite its awkwardness, to convey to Putin the futility of his war and of his attempts to undermine support for Ukraine by engineering energy crises in Europe and hunger crises globally.

In case Putin escalates and resorts to nuclear threats, the West should not be intimidated, reminding Russia of the invisible rules of the war: that neither side wants to turn this conventional war into a wider NATO-Russian confrontation. A nuclear escalation would violate these rules and could lead to NATO involvement. It would be to everybody's detriment.

Ukraine's successes have opened a solid path to constructing a Ukraine too strong for Russia to attack in the future.

That is a substantial achievement. The unresolved question is how Putin will attempt to manage Russia's bleak position, with what military purpose and with what political message. To give up, he would have to reinvent himself politically.

To mobilize he would have to reinvent the Russia he has been creating since coming to power in 2000; the Russia saved from the chaos of the 1990s; the Russia that was ushering in a stable, consumption-oriented middle class; the Russia in which a private life, far away from politics, was a pleasant pastime. By invading, Putin thought he would push Zelensky's Ukraine into the abyss. He may in fact have done this to his own regime. (Foreign Affairs).

Comment – For Putin to mobilize, he needs to declare war – in terms of the Russian Constitution – and convert Russian domestic economic and societal organization to a war footing. Easier said than done. To date he has fought this war with “proxy” forces and mercenary groups. Main Street Russians, particularly those in and around Moscow – and where Russia's densest population centers exist – have shown no desire to go to war. Putin knows this and has resisted constant pressure from his supporters to declare war.

To declare war he needs to show that Russia has been invaded, again a Russian constitutional requirement, and that has not happened. He may try and construe Crimea and the Donbas as Russian provinces, invoking a “manufactured” invasion, but who knows what he and the Kremlin are capable of?

Secondly, the US, NATO and the EU have been hugely emboldened by Russian failures of both strategy and military processes. We can expect to see this harden going forward and may even lead to a NATO membership for Ukraine as a barrier to future Russian aggression.

Now is the time, the West may consider, given Russia's economic woes, lack of military manufacturing capability and capacity and growing global isolation, to push further ahead in incapacitating Russian appetite for foreign mischief.

Ukraine has shown no desire for capitulation of any sort nor of surrendering Ukrainian soil, anywhere. It may take bigger players to sort through and negotiate a lasting settlement.

Ukraine is a victim of its creation, long a founding region of modern Russia and long a member of the overall Russian zone of influence. Its borders, similar to those of the Balkans and Middle East, are fraught with mistaken lines and partitions.

The wolves are circling with surrounding countries raising long-standing and historical grievances about how their people(s) and cultures were included in foreign states and arrangements, not the least of which is Ukraine, beset with foreign peoples throughout its terrain.

Andrei Marga, former Romanian minister of foreign affairs and education, also head of the Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca (but with no political involvement at this moment), made striking statements apparently in support of Russia's rhetoric against Ukraine on the occasion of the launch of his book "The Fate of Democracy" at the Alba Transilvana Book Fair.

He spoke about the "artificial" borders of Ukraine, which should cede more territories to Russia, Hungary, Poland and Romania.

It is going to take a statesman or woman to sort through long-term peace negotiation requirements and political and societal pragmatism.

Containment

'This is not a lull,' Zelenskyy affirms - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy promised his country there would be no letup in the counteroffensive that has reclaimed towns and cities from Russian troops, as shelling continued Sunday across a wide stretch of Ukraine.

Zelenskyy ran through a list of towns that Ukraine has taken back in its lightning push across the northeast.

"Maybe now it seems to some of you that after a series of victories we have a certain lull," he said in his nightly video address. "But this is not a lull. This is preparation for the next series. ... Because Ukraine must be free -- all of it."

Ukraine's military command said its forces secured the eastern bank of the Oskil River on Saturday. The river, which flows south from Russia into Ukraine, had been a natural break in the newly emerged front lines since Kyiv's counteroffensive began.

US Says tanks are on the table for Ukraine - U.S. defense official said "tanks are on the table" for Ukrainian forces but Ukraine will need to show the ability to maintain more modern variants to receive them. Western countries have already provided Ukraine with Soviet-era tanks.

US Navy interested in Alexandroupoli port - The northeastern port of Alexandroupoli is fast becoming a "second Souda" – a reference to the major Greek and NATO naval base on the island of Crete.

Senior US military officials have proposed further deepening and expanding the port with a view to hosting and supplying US Arleigh Burke-class destroyers. These ships play an important role in the US Navy, as they carry guided missiles and have expanded electronic warfare capabilities.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine last February, Alexandroupoli port has proved a reliable alternative to the Bosphorus Strait, which Turkey closed to all warships four days after the war started. Thousands of soldiers, tanks, helicopters and other supplies for US and other NATO forces have been quickly and effectively deployed to Eastern Europe.

US Soldiers Provide Telemaintenance as Ukrainians MacGyver Their Weapons – At a military base in Poland some four dozen U.S. troops here are helping their Ukrainian counterparts across the border fix and maintain 155mm howitzers, Javelin launchers, HIMARS and other weapons. But since the Americans aren't in Ukraine, they're providing assistance via encrypted digital chats, sending replacement parts, and consulting on parts the Ukrainians make themselves. It's vital work at an airbase that could be among the first targets if Russia expands the war beyond Ukraine.

GeoMilitary

China lodges complaint after Biden says US will defend Taiwan in a Chinese invasion - The Chinese foreign ministry said on Monday that China has lodged "stern representations" with the United States, after U.S. President Joe Biden said U.S. forces would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion.

China reserves the right to take all necessary measures in response to activities that split the nation apart, said Mao Ning, spokesperson at the foreign ministry, at a regular media briefing.

Deadly clashes on Tajik-Kyrgyz border leave a swath of destruction - There are burned-out shops, destroyed homes, and many stories of death and destruction on both sides of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border following clashes between the two countries that have claimed around 100 lives.

GeoPolitics

Nancy Pelosi visits Armenia, raising hopes of U.S. assistance - Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, said her visit had been planned long before the recent escalation between the two sides. Many of her remarks appeared to be aimed at bolstering "Armenian democracy" and the fruits of the Velvet Revolution that brought the current government to power, suggesting that was the original agenda of the trip.

But the timing of the trip was significant, as it happened to be during the period of greatest tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan since the war between the two sides in 2020, and during a period of geopolitical tumult. Azerbaijan has been making unprecedented attacks on Armenian territory (most of the decades-long conflict has, until the last week, taken place on territory internationally recognized as Azerbaijani). And the authority of Russia, Armenia's key security guarantor, appears to be waning as it suffers military setbacks in Ukraine.

Flare-ups among China-backed SCO members expose embarrassing limits - On paper, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is vast as its member states collectively represent more than two-fifths of humanity, not least because China and India, two of the world's most populous countries, are members. But critics have often observed that it's less than the sum of its parts.

That is no doubt true, at least for now. But the West better hope it never becomes equal or even greater than the sum of its parts. Because then, it will truly mark the rise of Eurasia. And given the unfortunate trajectory into which Russia has locked itself under Vladimir Putin, China will likely be at the head of it. But for now, that will remain aspirational. That is inadvertently made clear by the "Samarkand Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation."

At the outset, it states: "Security is the main theme of the Samarkand Declaration ... in Central Asia."

But a glance at the SCO's list of members and partners would show that two "dialogue partners" – Azerbaijan and Armenia – started fighting each other days before the summit.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have long been at loggerheads with each other. The latest border flare-ups has seen more than 80 people killed so far. Perhaps China thinks both countries fall under the Russian sphere as they are members of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation. But their ongoing hostilities also speak to Russia's and the CSTO's ineffectiveness.

The success of China in building up, stealthily, its own influence – as a result of a weakened Russia – across Central Asia via the SCO as the prime instrument may be of even greater economic and geopolitical consequences in the long run. It is, after all, intended to be the land mass answer for China to the maritime encirclement of the United States and its allies in the Indian and Pacific oceans.

But while China talks like the big brother of the SCO, it needs to start acting more like one. It needs to play a far bigger and more active role in mediating intra- and inter-conflicts among SCO members and partners. So far, it has been slow all this year.

All the while, these "warring" members of SCO are mainly ex-members of the Soviet Union, and reportedly in the power ambit of Putin. Russia being unable to control them will speak volumes to China of Russia's ability to remain a senior member of the association.

Three Regimes in Russia

Revolutions can be tricky things. Often, they are fairly obvious and hard to miss - the Bastille is stormed, the Tsar is placed under house arrest, or the British are forced to leave the Atlantic seaboard in disgrace. The political and societal churn that accompanies such dramatic state upheaval provides catharsis for angry populations, avenues of ascent for the ambitious, and the climactic "year zero" of the new state, society and man, who is permitted to believe that everything really has changed. These sorts of revolutions feel good - at least for a time.

Paradoxically, however, the most successful political revolutions tend to be the ones that nobody notices.

Consider, for example, the curious case of England, where a decade of civil war, regicide, and a brief interregnum of rule by Oliver Cromwell failed to resolve the tensions between the Crown and Parliament. Within a few years of Cromwell's death, the restored monarchy had issued a Seditious Practices Act which made it a crime to even suggest that Parliament could rule without the King's assent. Monarchs continued to veto acts of Parliament, right up until 1708, when Queen Anne vetoed the Scottish Militia Bill. Since that moment, no British monarch has vetoed an act of Parliament - but why? Nothing about the legal mechanism was formally changed; no heads were chopped off. Under Queen Anne's successor, George I, royal power gradually diminished, and the guiding animus of the state concretized around a cabinet led by Lord Robert Walpole, who became the de facto first Prime Minister.

Cromwell's revolution did not last. Neither did the counterrevolution of the restored monarchy. Walpole's however, did, and it happened gradually and almost indiscernibly to the common people of England - like the proverbial frog that is slowly brought up to boil.

Americans, similarly, like to speak of their "Revolution," naively believing that there was only one. In fact, America has undergone no less than four revolutions. The first, most famous, and only openly acknowledged one ended British rule, but the subsequent, unseen revolutions changed the American system of government no less than the first had.

(i) The American Civil War forced the state to expand its capacity to deal with the strains of war - the state sold bonds and levied income taxes for the first time, created new agencies like the Bureau of Pensions and a primitive Department of Agriculture, and government contractors exploded as the government vacuumed up weapons and

supplies. The rapid expansion of the federal bureaucracy also spawned a patronage system, wherein jobs and sinecures were distributed as political favors - a concept that is very familiar to modern Americans who are used to seeing the revolving door between Washington DC and the defense contractors in Baltimore and Northern Virginia.

(ii) Subsequent American revolutions occurred in the 1930's, when the Great Depression provided screening for FDR's New Deal and the further metastasization of the federal bureaucracy and its powers (*Wickard v. Filburn*), and again in the 1960's, when (iii) Civil Rights added a new dimension of litigiousness to society. The Civil Rights movement sought to overturn a democratically established system of legal oppression in the South - a worthy cause, perhaps, but to accomplish this, the federal government needed to empower judges and bureaucrats against southern state governments, creating, in effect, a weaponized federal apparatus that did not simply disappear once segregation had been dismantled.

The point of this admittedly rather long detour is not to air the laundry of Anglo-American political history, but rather to make what I think is an important point: the political system of a country can be radically remade without the accompanying bloodshed that we typically think of as characterizing revolutions.

Such "silent revolutions" have occurred countless times in countless places, but here I would like to consider the ways this has occurred in Russia.

Civil War Without Revolution

One of the defining periods of Russian history is the so-called Time of Troubles. This was a fifteen year period of civil war and general societal upheaval which took place between 1598 and 1613.

The causes were myriad. Underlying the whole situation was a general exhaustion of Russia's security and economic model. The Tsar granted landed estates to the military class in exchange for their service, but by the late 1500's the country was short on both productive agricultural land and peasants to work the fields. As a result, military servitors found it ever harder to meet their expenses (some even sold themselves into temporary slavery), and the peasantry was ever more harshly oppressed by their landlords. Simultaneously, Russian urban areas were becoming depopulated as residents fled to avoid taxes (one peculiarity of the Russian state at the time being the fact that the tax burden fell almost exclusively on townsfolk). The whole concoction was very dangerous - a resentful and oppressed peasantry, depopulated and impoverished towns, and a military servitor class that was barely hanging on.

The extinction of the ruling dynasty lit the whole explosive mixture on fire. The Tsar, Feodor I, was mentally handicapped (some now suspect Down's Syndrome) and unable to produce an heir, and his death sent the country spiraling into a cataclysmic civil war which ravaged the land. The Troubles live up to their name in every way - the country was subjected to the bizarre spectacle of a series of imposter tsars, who all claimed to be "Dmitri," the supposed long lost son of Ivan the Terrible. Every time a Dmitri was killed, a new imposter would materialize claiming to have miraculously escaped death. Eventually, Russia was invaded by both Poland and Sweden, while much of the country became the domain of armed bandits. Moscow was finally liberated after an extended Polish occupation by an army of patriotic Cossacks and militia.

The Time of Troubles fits the conventional profile of a political revolution. The ruling dynasty went extinct, and the subsequent unrest and civil war saw mass participation from virtually all strata of society. The end result of the troubles, however, was the total reset of the political system to its pre-Troubles form.

Michael Romanov was chosen to become the new Tsar, and his coronation and reign were carefully choreographed to signal continuity with the old dynasty (to whom he was related). Despite the fact that the liberation of Moscow and the enthronement of the Romanovs was made possible by the lower classes - especially the Cossacks - the reconstituting Romanov state was built around the high born princes and aristocrats (boyars) and expended much of its energy putting the Cossacks back in their place.

The result was a Civil War which ended in a political settlement wherein nothing changed. The desire, after so much disorder and death, was only to put everything back the way it was before, and the first Romanovs presented themselves as a continuation of the interrupted old Tsardom. Power continued to be concentrated in the aristocratic families that swirled in constellation around the throne... at least for a time.

The Rule of Strong Men

Peter the Great was born in 1672 into a very confused political situation. He was the son of Tsar Alexei by his second wife - the first having died after giving Alexei several children. As the child of the second marriage, Peter's position in the hierarchy was not ideal, but each of his half siblings had problems that helped his case: the eldest boy, Feodor, was extremely frail and chronically ill (and die shortly after taking the throne), the second, Ivan, had some undiagnosed but extreme mental handicap (he allegedly sat still staring blankly into space for hours), and the rest were girls and thus unable to take the throne.

Given the confused state of the court - and the activities of ambitious and conniving aristocrats who were always seeking to aggrandize themselves - Peter spent his formative years shuffled off to the side, where he began to do what many young boys have done throughout the ages: he played soldier.

As a royal son, however, Peter had the power to recruit local boys, requisition real weaponry, and hire foreign instructors to drill them. Peter's famous "toy army" became his adolescent preoccupation - but it was also the embryonic form of the Guards Regiments that would become a crucial arm of the state.

From a group of boys drilling in the woods outside Moscow, Peter's regiments were gradually transformed into bona fide military units, which were formally christened the Semyonovsky and Preobrazhensky Life Guards Regiments. The regiments fought with distinction in Peter's wars against Sweden, and when he built the new city of St Petersburg on the Baltic and moved the capital there, the Guards Regiments became a sort of gendarme, permanently posted in the heart of the court.

Alongside his overhaul of the military and the formation of the Guards, Peter famously engaged in a concerted effort to whip the nobility into shape (sometimes literally). For centuries, the Russian aristocracy had been governed by a system known as Mestnichestvo ("Position Rank"), which placed all the aristocratic families in a tightly regulated and choreographed hierarchy based on family pedigree and determined which men could be appointed to which positions. This system was a bulwark against meritocracy, incentivized jealousy, and stagnated the ruling system. According to the iconic Russian historian Vasily Klyuchevsky:

"You could beat a boyar up, you could take away his property, you could expel him from government service, but you could never make him accept an appointment or a seat at the tsar's table lower than what he is entitled to."

In place of this sclerotic system, Peter instituted a famed "Table of Ranks," which assigned hierarchical preeminence based on service to the state - it further equivocated between service in the civil government, the military, and the court. For example, a State Councilor in the civil government was equivalent to a Brigadier General in the Army, or to a Cup-Bearer in the court. The Table of Ranks was intended to jolt the aristocracy into action, creating a competitive drive to serve the state in order to enhance their ranks.

The Table of Ranks did not eliminate Russia's hereditary aristocracy. Most high positions continued to be filled by sons of old and great families - but the reforms did create the necessary incentives to drive better state service from these men, as well as create avenues for ambitious and competent low-born men to rise. The frenetic activity of Peter's reign allowed a coterie of key functionaries to coalesce around him. Some, like Boris Sheremetev, were the scions of old aristocratic families; others, like Alexander Menshikov - "The Prince from the Dirt" - were commoners who came from nothing.

The ingredients of Peter's silent revolution begin to come together. The Guards Regiments mill about their barracks in the heart of the Saint Petersburg palaces - a potent armed force in direct proximity to the halls of power and free access to the rooms where secrets are whispered. Menshikov and Peter's other "New Men" - men who enjoyed a meteoric rise by participating in Peter's numerous reforms and projects, who would militate to protect the new system.

Finally, we add in the simple fact that Russia had no concretized system of succession. Peter favored a system of designation, allowing the reigning Tsar-Emperor to choose his heir, but he never exercised this prerogative himself - famously writing 'leave it all to' on his deathbed, and falling unconscious before he could complete the sentence.

No sooner had Peter the Great died than the system he built sprang into action to defend itself. Menshikov convened the rest of the inner circle in a room down the hall from the Tsar's body, and they agreed that Peter's second wife, Catherine, should become Empress. Menshikov summoned the Guards Regiments and appraised them of the situation. The Guards then paraded out into the grounds of the Winter Palace and acclaimed "our Sovereign Lady and Empress Catherine."

For the entirety of the 18th Century - beginning with Peter the Great - power in Russia was settled by the will of strong men in Saint Petersburg. Catherine I was chosen in 1725 by Peter's men, and her ascension was made real by the Guards Regiments. In 1730, Anna (a niece of Peter's) was then similarly chosen by Catherine's privy council. The childless Anna designated her infant nephew as her heir, but the child and his parents were soon arrested by the Guards Regiments, who instead acclaimed Peter's daughter Elizabeth as the Empress. Finally, Elizabeth's own nephew (another Peter, and a particularly lousy one) was himself arrested and murdered by the Imperial Guards, who favored his wife (another Catherine, and a particularly great one).

All the transitions of power between the death of Peter the Great and the time of Catherine the Great at the end of the 18th century were decided almost entirely by the Guards Regiments and the strongmen at the highest ranks of the state at the time. This has at times been characterized as Russia's age of Praetorian Rule, recalling the Praetorian Guard of the Roman Empire, which both murdered and selected emperors seemingly at will. The Guards were the creation of the Emperor, but over time the Emperor (or Empress, as the case may be) seemed to increasingly be the creation of the Guards. Catherine the Great in particular, as a foreigner, owed her reign to the support of the Guards, and her two most famous lovers - Grigory Orlov and Grigory Potemkin - were both Guards officers.

Because the Guards and the strongmen of the nobility were the crucial determinants in any transition of power, they necessarily became the base of power for the monarch. The entire guiding animus of Peter's reign had been to modernize Russia by goading the elites into action; crafting carrots and sticks that would force a lethargic, sclerotic, and corrupt hereditary aristocracy into rendering better and more dynamic state service, wedding them to Peter's project of modernization.

Monarchy

Peter's silent revolution was to elevate strong men to the heights of the state and nurture a prestigious and politically invested armed force in the heart of the court. This created a self-perpetuating Petrine machine that drove Russia's ascent to preeminence; the machine conscripted peasants to build new cities and man the army, creeping like slow moving lava over weakened neighbors like Poland and the decaying Khanates of Central Asia, reaching an apogee under Catherine the Great, who conquered Crimea from the Tatars and settled the steppes of Novorossiia with Russian peasants, founding the cities of Odessa, Nikolayev, Kherson, Sevastopol, and Mariupol. When the ruler faltered - either by dying, or by being weak - Peter's Praetorian Machine sprang into action to select and install a new Emperor or Empress that would safeguard and advance its interests.

All of this was undone by one of the most ignominious and unappreciated of Russia's rulers - Tsar Paul, son of Catherine the Great. Paul ruled for only five years and had the bad fortune of being the link between his famous mother and his

son Alexander I, who defeated Napoleon, making Paul himself look rather lame by comparison. He also had the even worse fortune of being assassinated, which virtually ensured a negative popular image, since assassins are rarely induced to speak well of their victims.

Paul spent most of his life languishing, waiting for his mother to die so that he could rule (not unlike King Charles III). Paul resented the fact that his mother - who was not Russian at all - had, in effect, usurped his father and generally considered Catherine to have unjustly occupied the throne. He could not go back in time and begin his reign earlier, but he could prevent the same injustice from befalling his descendants - so, one of his first acts was to promulgate a formal succession law dictating that the throne should pass down by strict male primogeniture.

This, with a single stroke of the pen, neutered the Praetorian State by denying the Guards and the Aristocrats of their power to influence the succession.

Paul was not done. He was a man with strong military inclinations - not in the sense of craving war or violence, but in his love of the predictability, discipline, and hierarchy of the army. He therefore attempted to force the Russian aristocracy into a more intense and disciplined service to the state - what one historian has called Paul's attempted "militarization of government."

He had little sympathy for the liberties that the nobility had enjoyed under Catherine and encouraged provincial governors to pressure aristocratic sons into state service. It has been suggested that Paul suffered from what would now be diagnosed as obsessive-compulsive disorder: he was extremely preoccupied with rules, cleanliness, and predictability, and he imposed these principles on his environment by attempting to create a more rationalized government that ran according to routines and procedures. This led him to lean on professional administrators rather than a loose coterie of aristocratic administrators.

Paul's twin attempts to both neutralize aristocratic privileges and force the nobility into more intense state service naturally made him unpopular with those same aristocrats, and in due time he was assassinated in his bedchamber. But the succession law stayed, and his son Alexander took the throne. From that point on, the throne passed cleanly down the male line.

Paul's descendants steadily moved the country towards a cabinet style government, with successive advances under Nicholas I, who established a multi-department Chancery that ran most affairs of state, and Alexander II, who abolished serfdom.

The end of serfdom was a great moral victory, but it also forced a radical reorganization of the country's administrative life. The relationship between landowner and serf was an oppressive one, but it was also the basis of the state's functionality. Landowners acted as conscription agents, tax collectors, and police on their own estates - lightening the administrative burden on the state and distributing responsibility for keeping law and order. With serfdom ended, this relationship was severed, and the state was forced to radically expand its footprint in order to take up the administrative and policing duties that had previously belonged to the aristocracy.

By the late 1800's, the power structure in Russia had radically changed, and the old cooperative arrangement between the aristocracy and the monarch had gradually given way to a bureaucratized autocracy where the Tsar wielded unconstrained political power enforced by a thinly stretched administrative police state.

The Russian state underwent two systematic restructurings under the Romanov dynasty. The first was inaugurated by Peter the Great, who tried to break apart the stale and calcified old feudal rank system and reinvigorate the aristocracy with new incentives and a powerful Praetorian Guard to safeguard the machine. The second began with Paul, who in turn neutralized the political power of the Guards to control the succession process, continued by his sons and grandsons, who pushed Russia further from aristocratic oligarchy towards a bureaucratic-administrative state. Both of

these revolutions were essentially silent, in that they occurred by the gradual action of political mechanisms, and without major social unrest or civil war. Even the abolition of serfdom was achieved bloodlessly - no small feat indeed.

The Age of Party Rule

Of course, not all revolutions are bloodless and quiet. Russia's most famous revolution was born in a world war and became a civil war which left untold millions dead. This is not the place to adjudicate or discuss the events that led to Bolshevik rule in the lands of the Russian Empire. Instead, let us make a brief meditation on the political fruits of that war and revolution. The Bolsheviks crafted something entirely new and undeniably innovative: the party-state.

The defining structural feature of the Soviet state was innovative party-state dualism. The Bolshevik Party, later renamed the Communist Party, remained a nominally private organization that was institutionally separate from the state.

It wielded power by virtue of personal union with the state, rather than legal or institutional union. That is to say, the Communist Party ruled the Soviet Union because every member of the state's organs - every bureaucrat, policeman, the head of every trade union, the manager of every factory, the director of every collective farm, and every commissar was a member of the Party, and was duty bound to obey party dictates.

The state had a Council of People's Commissars, which on paper was a fairly typical cabinet style government, whose chairman was the equivalent of a prime minister. Yet decision making did not occur on this council; it occurred in the Politburo, which was the highest decision making body of the Party.

Virtually every institution in the country became statized, after the abolition of private property, and the nature of party-state dualism dictated that party organizations should proliferate and dominate inside all institutions. The result was something akin to a theocracy. The state, with its bureaucracy, police force, factories, farms, and intelligence services provided the musculature and the organs of the Soviet Union, enabling it to move and act in the world - but the party provided the skeleton and the nerves, binding all the variegated parts together and ensuring that it acted with a single purpose.

The Party, in turn, was governed by the Secretariat and the Orgburo, which made personnel decisions, disciplined party members, and distributed rewards like jobs, apartments, cars, and vacations. These organs controlled the party "apparatus" - the administrative web of party committees and organizations staffed by "apparatchiks", who were party members who worked full time for the party and did not hold outside posts (a powerful but narrow minority of the party's full membership).

The focal point of this control system was the Nomenklatura ("System of Names"), which consisted of those party members that were elevated to state positions - factory managers, university administrators, bureaucratic posts, and high office.

Consolidation of the party-state dual structure was achieved under Stalin, whose massive appetite for work, administrative prowess, and political acumen gave him the skillset needed to tame an entirely new sort of state structure and force it to do what he wanted.

Any suspicions that the party-state was a manifestation of Stalin's will were put to rest after his death. Lavrentiy Beria and Georgy Malenkov, two crucial members of Stalin's inner circle at the end of his life, both had technocratic tendencies - which is to say, they favored empowering the state organs and reducing the overt influence of the party. They were defeated in the post-Stalin power struggle by Nikita Khrushchev - a party man par excellence whose base of power was precisely the apparatchiks whose influence Beria wanted to curtail.

Ultimately, the party state was undone by its final leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, who opted to neuter his own administrative system. In many ways, he faced a problem that was intimately familiar to Peter the Great: an elite that had become sclerotic, corrupt, and - as Gorbachev saw it - simply incapable of doing what needed to be done to carry the country forward.

Gorbachev desperately wanted to be a reformer - he earnestly desired to be a second Lenin, who could reinvigorate the socialist system and push a stagnating superpower to new heights. But the party was a problem - as the source of all political power in the country, he needed the party to implement reforms, but it was an obstacle to those very reforms.

Gorbachev believed that he needed to jolt the party into action and break through the opposition of the party apparatus. To do this, he neutered the secretariat - the same administrative body that was his own source of power. He distributed the secretariat's duties to other bodies, drastically reduced its staffing, and stopped convening meetings, before neutralizing the party's political power altogether with changes to the constitution. Having emaciated the powers of his own party, Gorbachev jumped to a new office - "President of the Soviet Union" - and attempted to use this new position to wield power.

For Gorbachev - a committed communist who idolized Lenin - to intentionally destroy the party's hold on power seems bizarre, but it makes good sense given his own presuppositions and logic.

He believed that the sclerotic USSR needed reform, and he viewed the party - especially the apparatchiks - as a barrier to reform. But the idea of party-state dualism gave him an out; he could weaken the party while empowering the state, so that the state could do the work of reform that the party seemed unable or unwilling to do. What he did not understand was that it was the party that held the entire construct together. Without skeleton or nerves, the Soviet Union collapsed into an unseemly pile of formless flesh.

Regimes and Revolution

On a sojourn through Russian history, one can identify several discreet regimes, three of which we have discussed at length here:

1. **Praetorian Rule:** rule by the monarch, through the Guards Regiments, strongmen, and aristocratic allies - animated by the reforms of Peter the Great.
2. **Bureaucratic Monarchy:** rule by the monarch through the bureaucratic, administrative, and policing organs of the state. The transition towards this regime from the Praetorian regime was begun by Paul I changing the succession law and concretized by his successors.
3. **The Party-State:** a dualistic structure where the ruling party remained a private organization, institutionally separate from the state, but controlling all political and bureaucratic matters through its control of state personnel.

The comparison of the current Russian government to praetorian rule is obvious - Putin is surrounded by so-called "Siloviki," or "Strongmen." This is a government amply staffed with current and former personnel of state security agencies. Putin himself is a former head of the Federal Security Bureau, and the most powerful men in Russia are by and large "securocrats." While some have tried to call Russia a de-facto single party state, given United Russia's supermajority in legislative bodies, the comparison is an atrocious one. There is no omnipotent party apparatus controlling all things behind the scenes, and the bureaucratic reach of United Russia as such is miniscule and unworthy of comparison to the Communist Party in its heyday.

In any case, the long arc of Russia's history should give us pause before we seek to speak of its political system with broad, blunt categories. This is a civilization which marks its progress in centuries, and from its medieval past to its Praetorian apogee, on down through the rise and fall of party rule, it has always been defined by tenacity and clever

mobilization of resources. Putin is only the latest in a long line of Russian leaders to confront the problem of mobilizing indigenous resources while in a state of civilizational siege. Whether the securitocracy, this neo-Praetorian state can successfully manage the current crisis remains to be seen.

One thing that is clear from history, however, is that state structure changes and adapts to face challenges - silent revolutions happen gradually, under the surface, as the state grapples with new challenges, fights to either reinvigorate or purge sclerotic and decaying elites (oligarchs, anyone?) and seeks new ways to defend itself and exert power.

This applies to Russia's competitors no less than it does to Russia herself. So for those hoping for spectacular regime change - be it the fall of Putin, or the collapse of dominant western institutions - you may be disappointed. Sometimes the revolution is quiet. (Big Serge from Big Serge Thoughts).