

Oliver B. STEWARD¹
United Kingdom

THE CHANGING NATURE OF RUSSIAN GRAND STRATEGY IN RELATION TO THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Abstract: *This paper will examine the relative factors that led to the initial ‘special military operation’ against Ukraine in 2022, and how factors on the ground have led to a (re)assessment of its strategic aims and goals. Neo-classical Realism as an IR theory provides a framework to illuminate how President Putin’s leadership and worldview, along with Russia’s wider ‘strategic culture’, as well as the wider notions of historical events, from the collapse of the Soviet Union to the present day, all of which have influenced Russia’s current strategic thinking. The following questions are: Was there a Russian Grand Strategy - and if so, what are its main characteristics in the run-up to the invasion? In addition, what is the role of Presidential leadership, as well as the nature of Russian strategic culture, and its wider historical context in shaping its objectives in Ukraine? Lastly, was the 2022 invasion of Ukraine inevitable? If not, why is this the case? I argue that the 2022 invasion of Ukraine was a strategic (mis)step, to bring about a favorable geopolitical outcome in the form of ‘regime change’ in Kyiv. However, once this objective was no longer achievable, Russian strategic objectives were subject to a (re)assessment towards more narrower goals. Furthermore, President Putin’s (mis)calculation, is also evidenced by not considering the solidarity shown by NATO, and the West more generally, to provide lethal aid to Ukraine in the form of a ‘proxy war’. This in turn has negatively impacted Russia’s ability to wage war. Consequently, President Putin’s policy options will become more and more limited by ‘path-dependent factors’ that will lead to a further continuation of hostilities - as seen in the latest Russian Spring Offensive in the Donbas region in Eastern Ukraine, and the continuing Battle for Bakhmut. Therefore, Russia’s strategic objectives have become defined more by geopolitical constraints as well as material limitations.*

¹ Oliver B. Steward, PhD, Chatham House, Royal United Services Institute. Email: oliver.steward@outlook.com

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Introduction

This article will demonstrate the central themes as to why it is important to understand Russian Grand Strategy in the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War 2022/23. Secondly, it will demonstrate, what can we learn about Russian decision-making and, in particular, how this relates to the changing ‘operational’ nature of Russia’s ongoing invasion. Lastly, by using the theoretical lens of Grand Strategy, and in particular the use of Neo-classical Realism, it enables us to understand both the initial strategic (mis)calculation to invade Ukraine and the changing nature of its aims and objectives.

In terms of having a deeper understanding of the changing nature of Russian Grand Strategy in the context of the Ukraine War, it is important to assess the relative impact of how these variables inform ‘threat perception’ of the Kremlin, which led to its subsequent military intervention. First, it is necessary to provide a working definition of Grand Strategy in its broadest context within the realm of international relations theory – specifically through the lens of Realism. In this context, the international relations theorist Barry Posen offers us a framework, in his book, “The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars” (1984). Posen explores how military doctrine is integrated with the political aspects of her grand strategy during the interwar period of the 20th century. The continued relevance of Posen’s work is seen in how his framework can be applied to contemporary studies of Grand Strategy. Therefore, I take this approach forward in relation to understanding the interaction of both the political and military aspects of Grand Strategy.

However, in relation to this Thesis, I broadly take this concept forward within my own approach to Russian Grand Strategy, as I investigate its military invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, Posen theorises upon Grand Strategy within a useful definition: “[A] nation-state’s theory about how to produce security for itself. Grand Strategy focuses upon military threats, because these are the most dangerous, and military remedies because these are often the costliest. Security has traditionally encompassed the preservation of sovereignty, safety, territorial integrity, and power position”².

Consequently, in order to understand the changes in Russian Grand Strategy in relation to its ‘special military operation’ against Ukraine, it is necessary to use the lens of Neo-classical Realism ‘black box’ of foreign policy analysis. I will be considering, the following core variables:

² B. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars*, Princeton University Press 1984, p. 1.

- Presidential leadership and decision-making of President Putin;
- Russian ‘Strategic Culture’ – hybrid/’Asymmetrical’/Attritional warfare;
- Wider historical context that helps formulate a ‘Doctrine’ for the use of military force.

This article will first offer a qualification in the argument about Grand Strategy that must be made. While the traditional understanding of Grand Strategy has looked at top-down strategic designs, an alternative school of thought can be found in the Emergent School. This brings a bottom-up view of a strategizing “with strategic learning occurring at all levels of the organization”³.

In this context, Russia's Grand Strategy is not static, and is subject to change, based in part on the changing context of the battlefield in Ukraine, as well as the (in)ability to achieve their core objectives during the initial assault. I will argue that following Russia’s strategic (mis)calculation, and lack of objectives achieved on the battlefield, this is evidenced following the Battle of Hostomel Airport, the failure to capture Kyiv, and its failure to neutralize President Zelensky and install a pro-Ukrainian leader. These factors combined led to the (re)assessment of Russia’s strategic aims and goals, thereby pursuing narrower objectives.

However, I add a further qualification to my argument – namely President Putin’s decision to order the ‘partial-mobilization’ of Russian military forces that I argue represents a certain ‘path dependency’. Firstly, this article sets out within the context of Neo-classical Realist thought, of how ‘path dependency’ can be used to explain a process of events which took place in Russian Grand Strategy. In this case, the ‘partial mobilization’ of Russian troops. The concept of ‘path dependency’ can be thus, conceived of as a process, defined by Levi, which includes: “Path dependence has to mean, if it is to mean anything, that once a country or region has started down a track, the costs of reversal are very high. There will be other choice points, but the entrenchments of certain institutional arrangements obstruct an easy reversal of the initial choice”⁴.

It is through this combination of physical constraints, institutional biases, and ongoing ‘operational limitations’ because of military interventions that generate a path dependency⁵, that this paper terms ‘sunk costs’ which facilitates

³ I. C. Popescu, *Grand Strategy vs. Emergent Strategy in the conduct of foreign policy*, “Journal of Strategic Studies” 2017, Vol. 3, No 41, pp. 438-460.

⁴ Quote from: P. Pierson, *Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics*, “The American Political Science Review” 1997, Vol. 2, No 94, p. 252, original author: M. Levi, *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism: Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions*, Cambridge 1997.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

a set of preferences towards a particular recourse of action, thereby limiting the options available for Presidential Leadership as well as the wider Kremlin inner-circle of decision-makers.

Lastly, I argue that ‘sunk costs’ represent constraints both politically and strategically to this eventual decision to call up Russian reservists and consequently in terms of policy outcomes, ‘surge’ Russian troops to pursue more limited objectives. Hence, ‘partial mobilization’ became the ‘emergent’ strategic outcome pursued by President Putin to towards more narrower war efforts.

In terms of debates relating to international relations theory, this article argues, that any analysis of Russia’s Grand Strategy must include an understanding of Presidential decision-making style, the ‘strategic culture’ in relation to the primacy placed upon the projection of military power to achieve political outcomes, and also, the concentration of power in the Kremlin. Therefore, this paper contends that any such any proposed framework needs to consider the wider push and pull factors of agency and structure.

In the context of the international relations approach of Neo-classical realism, by opening up the ‘black box’ of foreign policy analysis, and in using these specific variables, it allows us to understand both (a) how the interaction of these variables produces changes to Russian Grand Strategy in relation to the Russo-Ukrainian War, and secondly (b) how this led to the initial strategic (mis)calculation to invade Ukraine and also its subsequent (re)assessment towards narrower goal. This is seen in the context of Russian forces abandoning the goal of ‘regime change’ in Kyiv, as well as pursuing more limited military objectives in the Donbass and the South of Ukraine, including Crimea.

By considering the core variables, identified on the last page, it is an important way of understanding the wider practices that are found in the Kremlin. This includes the Presidential decision-making of Putin, and the nature of his power in the Kremlin, but also operating in the context of ‘strategic culture’, as well as the wider historical context of Russian Grand Strategy pursuits.

In other words, by employing these factors, this would explain President Putin’s strategic (mis)calculation in his decision to launch an invasion of Ukraine, based upon a false assumption of the Ukrainians themselves and in turn, not predicting the tenacity in which the Ukrainian people resisted the Russians.

Lastly, this framework offers a way to conceptualise how the initial Russian military and political objectives were sought and, how this was subject to change. Lastly, it is necessary to look at the operational side of Russia’s ongoing invasion in Ukraine, specifically, to look at the military constraints faced by Russian forces on the ground which led to Russia not being able to

achieve its initial military objectives that in turn, led to (re)assessment of its overall military strategy accordingly.

Historical overview of the lead up to russo-ukrainian war 2022/2023

Firstly, in order to understand the character of Russian foreign policy, and in particular the changing nature of its Grand Strategy, we must take a look at the historical context that has led up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I argue the invasion of Ukraine is the latest phase of an ongoing conflict that has started following the annexation of Crimea and, as such, this in turn demonstrates how Russian Grand Strategy has escalated, in accordance with the changing nature of its objectives. The Russo-Ukrainian War can be summarised as follows:

- The annexation of Crimea by Putin, and the start of the ‘frozen conflict’ in the Donbas region, with a ‘hybrid war’ waged by Russia;
- The advent of President Zelensky’s administration, 2021 (Pro-Western, Pro-EU, Ukrainian ‘nationalist’) and the lead up to the initial invasion;
- Decision to militarily invade on Thursday, 24th February 2022 with the aim of eliminating the Zelensky administration and replace with Pro-Russian leader, under the auspices of ‘demilitarisation and denazification’⁶ = Regime Change;
- However, the strategic objectives have subsequently changed to that of ‘retrenchment’ and the subsequent continuation of the war.

Table 1. The relative factors that contributed to the president Putin’s decision to launch the ‘special military operation’

Factors	Description	Examples
Physical/Material Constraints	Russian military resources available which can be accessed in order to generate a particular strategic outcome	Military troop deployments Social/Political capital The assessed utility of military force Russian “Way of Warfare”
Ideational Challenges	How President Putin and members of the Kremlin perceive the world, the policy issues at stake, and what prescriptions fit in	World View Political Legacy Foreign Policy prescriptions

⁶ President of Russia, *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, “The Kremlin”, 24.02.2022, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>> (30.09.2023).

Bureaucratic Power Balances	The increased centralised nature of the Kremlin – based upon the Russian Constitution, which allows for a concentration of power in the hands of the Presidency	Obstacle Removal Lack of opposition to decision Internal momentum generation
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Firstly, it is necessary to look at President Putin’s beliefs and worldview when understanding his Presidential decision-making, and the factors that led to the decision to launch a military invasion of Ukraine (as seen in tab. 1).

One of the relative factors that did indeed influence the formation of Russian Grand Strategy objectives is President Putin’s worldview and foreign policy approach (see tab. 1). Therefore, I argue, the aggregation of power within the Kremlin is seen as a constraint upon the formation of foreign policy alternatives that led to the ill-fated decision to invade Ukraine.

Consequently, Putin’s own leadership style had an impact upon the timing of the decision to launch the ‘special military operation’ as Freedman in his book opines, “Putin’s decision to embark on a war in Ukraine was a spectacular example of how delusions and illusions of one individual can be allowed to shape events without any critical challenge”⁷. In addition, in terms of what this article defines as ‘bureaucratic power balances’ (see tab. 1), the decision-making style can be summarised as a “rigid sequence of order and obedience, bad decisions will be left unchallenged, and possibilities of improving strategies and tactics by testing and probing alternative courses of action will be lost”⁸.

My working framework places emphasis on the aggregation of power within the Kremlin and, in this case, how President Putin’s own decision-making and the way in which strategic objectives are formulated: “Putin does not consult them for strategic advice, preferring to discuss the particulars of special operations. At meetings he asks specific questions to his subordinates, and they supply answers; there is no real discussion”⁹. Therefore, we can conclude that during the debate on the initial decision to invade, there was no other options given and debated within the Kremlin. The lack of debate within the Kremlin’s inner circle, as well as the centralised role underpinning Putin’s

⁷ L. Freedman, *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine*, Penguin: Random House UK 2022, p. 514.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

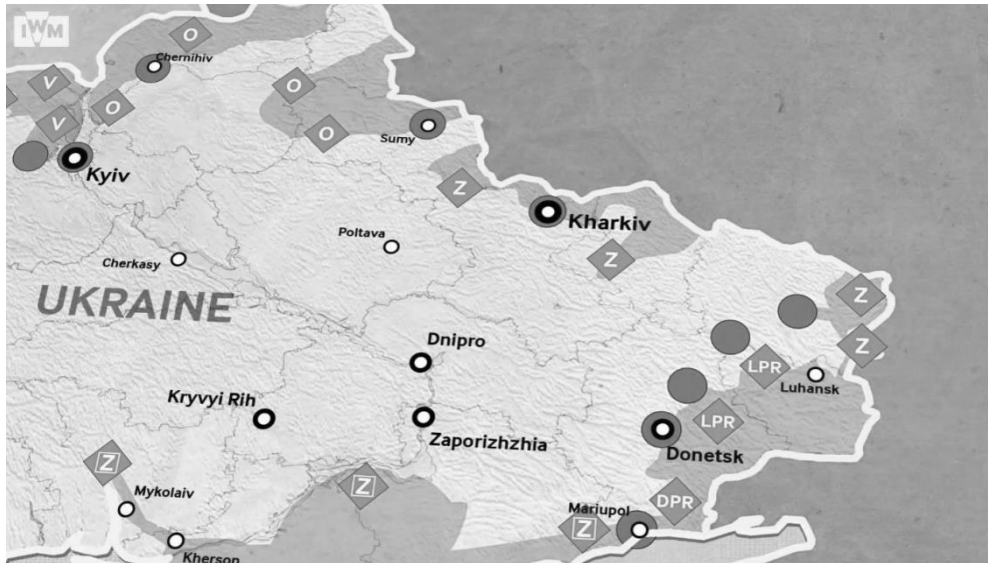
⁹ G. Pavlovsky, *Russian Politics Under Putin: The System Will Outlast The Master*, “Foreign Affairs” 2016, Vol. 95, No 3 (May/June), p. 12, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2016-04-18/russian-politics-under-putin>> (30.09.2023).

own Presidential leadership thus has a limiting impact upon Russian Grand Strategy due to a lack of alternatives being seriously discussed or debated. Putin's speech on the 24th of February, 2022 provides a glimpse into the rationale for military action: "To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetuated numerous bloody war crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation"¹⁰.

The next section will explore the relative factors as to why Russia was unable to achieve most of its military objectives, and what the subsequent implications were in terms of Russian Grand Strategy.

Why was Russia militarily unable to achieve its preferred military objectives? There was no plan B

Figure 1. A Map of the initial Russian "Special Military Operation"



Source: *Russian Invasion of Ukraine, How Putin Lost in 10 Days*, "YouTube Channel: Imperial War Museum (IWM)", <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9ym9TDs6Dg&t=30s>> (30.9.2023).

In terms of a strategic perspective, the Kremlin and President Putin during the initial invasion (fig. 1), believed Russia was able to win secure a quick

¹⁰ President Putin quote found in Fisher M., *Putin's Case for War, Annotated*, "The New York Times", 24.02.2022, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/world/europe/putin-ukraine-speech.html>> (30. 09.2023).

‘victory’ in a Blitzkrieg operation to but this was to no avail, due to the lack of perceived Ukrainian resistance. In terms of the Russian military objectives sought, “one of the main thrusts of the Russian offensive was directed against Kyiv”¹¹. In terms of Russia’s military planning, Plokhy summarise the core objectives sought: “The Russian military command planned to seize the airport with the help of a relatively small detachment of airborne troops and special forces. That would allow a much larger paratroop force to land in the vicinity of Kyiv, capture the city’s bridges across the Dneiper River, and limit the ability of the Ukrainian armed forces to manoeuvre and move its units through the Kyiv transportation hub”¹².

However, on both a strategic and a tactical level, Russia could not achieve its desired objectives due to several factors. One of those was based upon the fact: “In planning the opening phases of the war, Moscow was operating on a misguided belief the Ukrainian military would offer little or no resistance at all, and the Russians would be seen as liberators to ‘Nazism’”. This was not the case as demonstrated by the high number of casualties that the Russian military absorbed.

Furthermore, the inability to capture Kyiv also had political consequences, which meant that “Zelensky was not only safe in Kyiv but was turning himself into an inspiring and effective war leader, mobilizing international support for Ukraine’s war effort”¹³. This meant that Ukraine gain geopolitical capital, and appeal for Western military aid in their defense against the Russians.

It quickly became obvious that this war was not going to plan for Moscow, and that Russia was incurring massive casualties on the battlefield. By 24th June 2022, the Russians incurred equipment losses totalling an estimate of “almost 4,375 Russian losses (destroyed, damaged, abandoned and captured), including 789 tanks, with the comparable figures for Ukraine of 1,184 items including 198 tanks”¹⁴.

The strategic failure of initial operation was evident in the fact that Russian troops’ inability to capture Kyiv, in order to provide a strategic airlift to bring in the first wave of Russian paratroopers on Il-76 aircraft to the airport to advance onto Kyiv. A combination of Ukrainian military strategy and tactics made it more difficult for the Russian to be able to secure a quick military victory. This meant that the Russians were not able to achieve their first objective, which was the capture of Kyiv and install a pro-Russian regime. This, these military factors translated into Russia’s inability during the commencing days of the 2022

¹¹ S. Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, Allen Lane, an Imprint of Penguin Books 2023, p. 157.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 159-160.

¹³ L. Freedman, *op. cit.*, p. 394.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 397.

invasion were to bring about ‘regime change’. To summarise, in the context of Russian Grand Strategy, its emergent strategy was twofold.

Following Moscow’s inability to achieve its initial military objectives, this led to a reassessment of its Grand Strategy, in terms of its aims and strategic objectives. The main factors of the inability of Russia to achieve its main military objectives sought are as follows:

- The Russian military launched a ‘blitzkrieg’ operation in an effort to overwhelm Ukrainian forces;
- However, it was unable to achieve its objective of capturing Kyiv;
- Heavy sustained losses due to the strength of Ukrainian resistance;
- Russian military defeat in the Battle of Hostomel (lack of air superiority/tenacity of Ukrainian counter-attacks);
- As the Russians were unable to achieve a strategic airlift at Hostomel airport, meant that Russians could not fly in their advanced team of paratroopers on Il-76 heavy lift aircraft, in order to capture Kyiv, and install a pro-Russian leadership;
- Due to Russian tactical and strategic mistakes, the Ukrainian resistance was able to use rockets and other missiles to take out both trucks, and armoured Russian tanks including the T-72, leaving the Russian military without much needed logistical and armoured support;
- This in turn, further enhanced Ukrainian resolve to meet the Russian invaders, and launch a resolute defense; all of which, was not foreseen by Russian strategic and military planners;
- In terms of the battle landscape, the character and nature of this conflict quickly changes to one of ‘attrition’ with bloody ground combat seen in the Battle of Mariupol/Azovstal;
- This led to Ukrainian forces regrouping and able to counter-attack, but Russia pulled back to its ‘Southern Front’ and the ‘Donbass’.

The next section addresses the inevitability of Russia’s ‘partial mobilization’, and its subsequent ‘surge’ in its own controlled areas of Ukraine. Furthermore, this will address the underlying ‘path dependent’ factors that resulted in the ‘partial mobilization’, by examining in particular its policy consequences upon military strategy. Lastly, I will be addressing the ‘annexation of the four regions’ into the Russian Federation, and how this was an attempt by Putin to gain political capital on an already faltering military campaign.

The inevitability of the ‘partial mobilisation’?: the Russian ‘troop surge’

This section will take into considering the relative factors that impacted Russia’s strategic objectives from one of ‘regime change’, and how the failure to capture ‘Kyiv’, and to remove the Zelensky administration during the initial

military assault, has meant that Russia's military objectives, will inevitably be subject to change. To underline a point made already, the initial Russian invasion a strategic misstep, and this 'partial mobilisation' demonstrates how Russia has become stuck in this long-protracted ground war. This article argues that it is this combination of factors, it can be deserved as an 'emergent strategy'¹⁵. Secondly, I will invoke the concept known as 'sunk costs' and apply this to Russia's current (re)assessment of its strategic objectives in Ukraine.

From a political perspective, Russian Grand Strategy following its initial strategic (mis)step, evolved accordingly. On the 30th September, 2022, President Putin in Moscow officially declared the 4 areas (where referendums were held), thereby formally announcing that Russia had annexed four of the Ukrainian regions into the Russian Federation. The move by Moscow was condemned by Ukraine as well as the Western powers and contributed to an already deteriorating relationship between Moscow and the West. As such, these political developments represented a major escalation in the seven-month war.

Ukrainian President Zelensky was demonstrating key political acumen in his ability to gain popular support in Western capitals. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, among others started to make public visits to Kyiv, declaring their material support for Zelensky. The Russian inability to achieve an initial victory, by successfully winning a quick victory against Kyiv, meant that the Kyiv regime demonstrated its resilience, and was able to go on the diplomatic offensive to the West, in order to secure military aid to further its own war efforts to defend its territory from Russian attack. These geopolitical developments favouring Ukraine, meant that Russia's outright victory against Ukraine became further and further away from reality.

Firstly, in terms of the bureaucratic decision-making, the political-military leadership behind Putin consolidated his centrality. Furthermore, Putin has already mentioned not interested in alternative opinions, based upon previous interpretations of his decision-making style. In practice means, that no viable alternative will be considered or put on the table for discussion – the focus therefore will be on the details/planning of Putin's preferred strategy. Focus on detail, not overriding assumptions of the policy agenda.

The deteriorating military situation by September 2023, meant that Putin had to begin considering alternatives to relying solely on volunteer recruitment to fill the depleted ranks of the Russian military, who had inflicted upon them by fierce Ukrainian defenders' massive casualties. The Institute for the Study of War concluded: "Putin unsuccessfully attempted to establish new all-volunteer

¹⁵ I. Popescu, *op. cit.*, p. 447.

formations over the summer that competed with other existing quasi-official formations. Putin eventually abandoned his volunteer recruitment campaign after Ukrainian forces liberated much of Kharkiv Oblast between September 6 and September 11, ordering partial reserve mobilization on September 21”¹⁶.

From a political perspective Putin is willing to spend an enormous number of military resources in the form of ‘partial mobilisation’ in order to secure a more favourable military situation. Furthermore, with Putin embarking upon a ‘partial mobilisation’ and surging the number of troops to be deployed, they have now increased the military means at their disposal, such as freshly deployable troops and firepower, in an effort win a battlefield victory.

After the Ukrainian’s successfully destroyed Kherson Bridge on the 8th October, Putin claimed during his Annexation speech that the West “continues looking for another change to strike a blow at us, to weak and breakup Russia, which they have always dreamed about, to divide our state and set our peoples against each other, and to condemn them to poverty and extinction”¹⁷.

In addition, following the successful targeting of Kherson Bridge, President Putin authorised a large number of missile strikes against Kyiv itself, and other cities throughout the country, showing an increasingly indiscriminate nature to the use of violence against the Ukrainian people. This ushered in “[Putin’s] new target in the war, the goal being the destruction of the Ukrainian economy, and the will of the Ukrainians to resist”¹⁸.

However, by pursuing a narrower goal, without being able to remove Zelensky from political office in Kyiv, the Russians now lack clear metrics on what can be defined as ‘victory’, other than a brutal war of attrition, the likes of which we have not seen since the Second World War. To summarise, due to the ideological underpinning of the initial intervention, as well as the growing ‘militarism’ around the Kremlin, and the lack of opposition and/or the perceived lack of alternative opinions in the decision-making apparatus, leads us to predict that Russia will carry on waging military aggression in Ukraine for the short-to medium term.

The centralisation of political and military decision making behind Putin means that there are no viable alternatives to the ‘Partial-Mobilisation’ being put forward by other key Kremlin officials. The increasing ‘autocratic’ nature of the centralised decision-making in the Kremlin. No one within the Kremlin, due to the decision-making style of Putin’s own Presidential leadership, is

¹⁶ K. Stepanenko, F. Kagan, *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment*, Institute for the Study of War, “ISW Press”, 26.02.2023, <<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-26-2023>> (30.09.2023).

¹⁷ President of Russia, *Signing of treaties of accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia*, “The Kremlin”, 2022, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>> (30.09.2023).

¹⁸ S. Plokhyy, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

willing to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy for risk of losing their position in the Kremlin's hierarchy. Therefore, it is necessary to also have to factor in, how 'decisions' are made, and how this is part of the foreign policy-making process. Thus, all of these factors lead to a policy outcome consistent with 'path dependency', and the 'boxing in' of options, based upon the notion of 'Sunk Costs'.

However, following its inability to achieve most of its military objectives, Russia's political leadership finds itself unable to withdraw from Ukraine, based upon the underlying assumptions it has made for the initial invasion. Thus, withdrawal is politically inviable due to the political and ideational constraints of the Russian leadership. Therefore, in terms of decision-making, a chance of securing victory in Ukraine needs a change in strategy, coupled with increased military means to achieve these newly defined goals. As we shall see in the next section, one way to achieve this, is the use of 'asymmetrical means' such as Drones and other paramilitary groups.

The next section will look at the characteristics of Russia's asymmetrical warfare, in the form of Drones, Chechen fighters, and also Wagner PMC.

The russian way & 'assymetrical warfare': Wagner group during Russia's counter-offensive

This section will look at the use of 'hybrid warfare' as a key component of Russian Grand Strategy. A core argument of this article is that Russian iteration of 'hybrid war' is a key element in Russia's Grand Strategy and has been subject to both continuity and change. This has been evident in Russia's 'Special Military Operations' in Ukraine. As such, this section, will explore specifically how Russian 'strategic culture' informs its Grand Strategy. Secondly, I will argue that there is a so called 'Russian Way of War'.

Historically, we can already see how this form of warfare has been utilised in previous conflicts in both Russian interventions in Syria, as well as Africa, and also previously seen in the military context of the 'limited intervention' in the Donbass in 2014, otherwise known as the Frozen War. It is the purpose of this section, to look specifically at how 'hybrid warfare' is utilised by the Kremlin in the context of its current 'Special Military Operation', otherwise known as the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Furthermore, 'hybrid warfare' can be conceived as both "overt and covert, conventional and nonconventional" and are employed in a "coordinated, efficient, and often coercive fashion. It is holistic, opportunistic,

and flexible. It is a strategic art, not purely a military art”¹⁹. And, as such, it can be seen in the context of Russia’s particular ‘Way of Warfare’ – as an important tool to implement Russian Grand Strategy objectives, and this can be seen combined with asymmetrical forms of warfare as we will now explore. A continuity in terms of Russian Grand Strategy can be seen in the context of how ‘hybrid warfare’ was used to facilitate strategic objectives – such as that of the use of ‘little green men’ during the so-called ‘Frozen conflicts’ of the Donbass, and the annexation of Crimea²⁰. It was during the annexation of Crimea, the so called ‘little green men’ lacked any insignia, which created “uncertainty into the calculations in both Kiev and NATO”, and as such, these “deliberate maskirovka, or deception operations, was enough to give the Russians and their local allies, the time to take up commanding positions across Crimea”²¹. This is evident in the context of “[these] ‘little green men’ who were used in conjunction with other hybrid tactics such as the covert engagement of Russian forces on the ground, economic pressure, and an unprecedented disinformation campaign”²². While the emphasis then, was on plausible deniability of Moscow’s direct involvement, in the case of the 2022 Russian ‘Special military operation’, these asymmetrical tactics, are used as a ‘force multiplier’.

Now, this section will look at the operational aspects of achieving Russia’s objectives, specifically the resources used; such as, the use of Drones, Chechen paramilitaries, and also Private Military Contractors, such as Wagner, all of which combined demonstrates the ‘hybrid’ nature of the conflict. In the context of Russian Grand Strategy, the use of these resources as ‘force multiplier’ allows policymakers not having to incur more costs to the military. Therefore, in terms of the operational aspects of implementing Russian Grand Strategy, the use of these force ‘multipliers’ increases the military assets to be utilised in order to secure military objectives on the battlefield.

¹⁹ B. Seely, *A Definition of Contemporary Russian Conflict: How Does the Kremlin Wage War?*, Russia and Eurasian Studies Centre, Research Paper No 15, 2018, p. 5, <<https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/a-definition-of-contemporary-russian-conflict-how-does-the-kremlin-wage-war/>> (30.09.2023).

²⁰ M. Galeotti, ‘Hybrid War’ and ‘Little Green Men’: *How It Works, and How It Doesn’t*. New York University 2015, <<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/04/16/hybrid-war-and-little-green-men-how-it-works-and-how-it-doesnt/>> (30.09.2023).

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² J. Durkalec, *Nuclear-Backed “Little Green Men”: Nuclear Messaging in the Ukraine Crisis*, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, Report July 2015, <<https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/193514/Nuclear%20Backed%20E2%80%9CLittle%20Green%20Men%20E2%80%9D%20Nuclear%20Messaging%20in%20the%20Ukraine%20Crisis.pdf>> (30.09.2023).

However, firstly we will look at the use of Private Military Contractors, (PMCs), otherwise known as Wagner. Wagner has been subject to much inquiry in the press of late due to the events the events of the coup, and the events surrounding the suspected death of Prigozhin. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into detail about this matter, other than to say, that these events have enhanced the credibility of President Putin, following events after the coup.

The advantages of using ‘asymmetrical’ means to achieve Russian Grand Strategy objectives are as follows:

- The military logic behind and PMCs, in the form of Wagner, is that it augments Russia’s military firepower and capabilities;
- Iranian-made Kamikaze Drones are cheap to buy and manufacturer – useful for ‘psychological warfare’ and the ‘targeting of Ukrainian infrastructure’ (see next section), without incurring official losses;
- Chechen Para-military groups (that come under the direction of Kadyrov – Head of the Chechen Republic and is outside the Russian military command);
- The recruitment of prisoners was recruited to fight to increase numbers to supplement the Russian Army;
- Military logic behind this is to augment Russia’s military, without incurring official losses.

Earlier on in the Ukraine war, during the height of the fighting, the Wagner Boss Yevgeny Prigozhin went on a recruitment drive to prisons in order to harvest more fighters for his organisation. However, during the Battle of Bakhmut in 2023 we witnessed constraints in using Wagner to facilitate Russia’s military goals. This is evidenced, during the Battle itself Wagner chief complains about lack of ammo, with allegations levied at the Kremlin military leadership, that Wagner troops used as ‘Cannon Fodder’²³ to fill Russian line. In the context of Chechens, and Wagner (some of whom are poorly trained and not combat effective), this led to high casualties and attrition rates among their ranks. In addition, ‘Wagner Group’ become very important as both as advantage for the Kremlin but also increasingly as a constraint upon it.

In terms of the limitations of using Wagner, the Wagner leader Prigozhin started to make videos criticising the Russian leadership for constraints upon using Wagner. Critic of Putin himself, the Wagner leader complained about the casualties and lack of ammunition²⁴. Secondly, as we have all seen following Prigozhin’s failed mutiny on 23rd June 2024, and subsequent death, it has led to

²³ F. Gardner, *Prigozhin a dead man walking?*, “BBC News”, 24.08.2023, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-66601452>> (30.09.2023).

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

speculation as to whether Wagner has in fact become a constraint upon Russian Grand Strategy.

As we will see in the next section, the use of Iranian Made Kamikaze Drones also augmented Russia's military firepower in the face of its initial losses and was used to facilitate a new form of 'attritional warfare' against Ukrainian targets.

One cannot talk about Wagner, without talking about the failed coup by Prigozhin, and his eventual death, and its impact upon Russia's continuation of the war. While it is not the purpose of this article to go into detail about who was instrumental in his death, it is within the scope to discuss how the failed coup impacted upon the decision-making at the Kremlin, and the power that Putin still has.

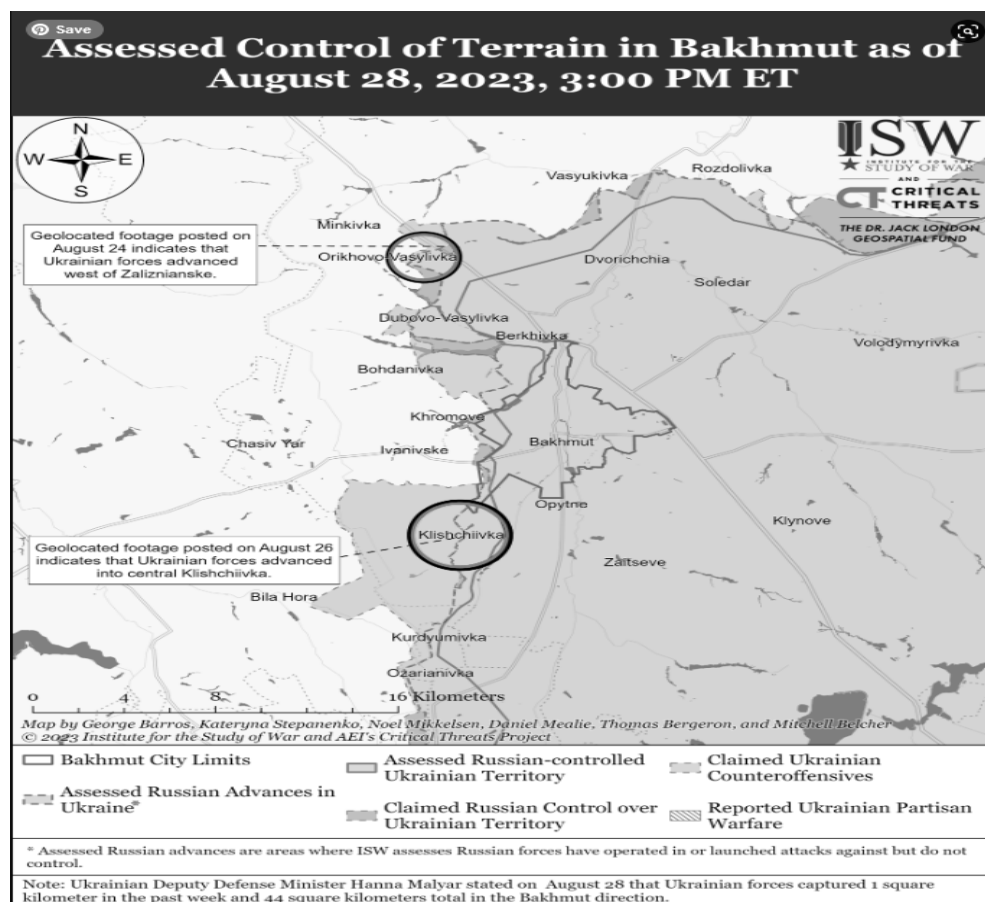
The failed coup cemented President Putin's centralised control over both political-military circles, and also, the continuation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, this impacted upon Kremlin-Wagner relations, as the Kremlin had bought Wagner under Russian state control. Although originally (re)deployed to Belarus as part of a 'deal' that Prigozhin had made with the Kremlin, it remained uncertain as to the exact purpose this would have had upon the war. But, following the death of Prigozhin, helped to strengthen Putin's power over any decision-making, and also deterred any other potential challengers to Putin's regime for the foreseeable future. The next section, will look at in particular, the strategic use of Drones within Russian military thinking, and its relation to Russian Grand Strategy.

The increasing use of drones to facilitate Russia's strategic objectives in Ukraine

This section will look at the use of Drones and how this in turn, serves to facilitate Russian strategic objectives within its Grand Strategy. In addition, this section argues in the context of Russia's 'War of Warfare', the use of Drones also correlates with Russian's propensity towards 'attritional warfare'.

In going further, I argue that in terms of Russia's 'Way of Warfare', with the use of Drones against civilian targets speaks to this nature, is complementary to this overall approach using 'attritional' warfare. The Battle of Mariupol (otherwise known as the Battle of Azovstal), specifically seen the targeting of civilian buildings, apartment blocks, as well as the Azovstal plant, became the hallmark for the latest iteration of Russia's 'attritional' approach to warfare.

Figure 2. The Battle of Bakhmut on 28th August, 2023)



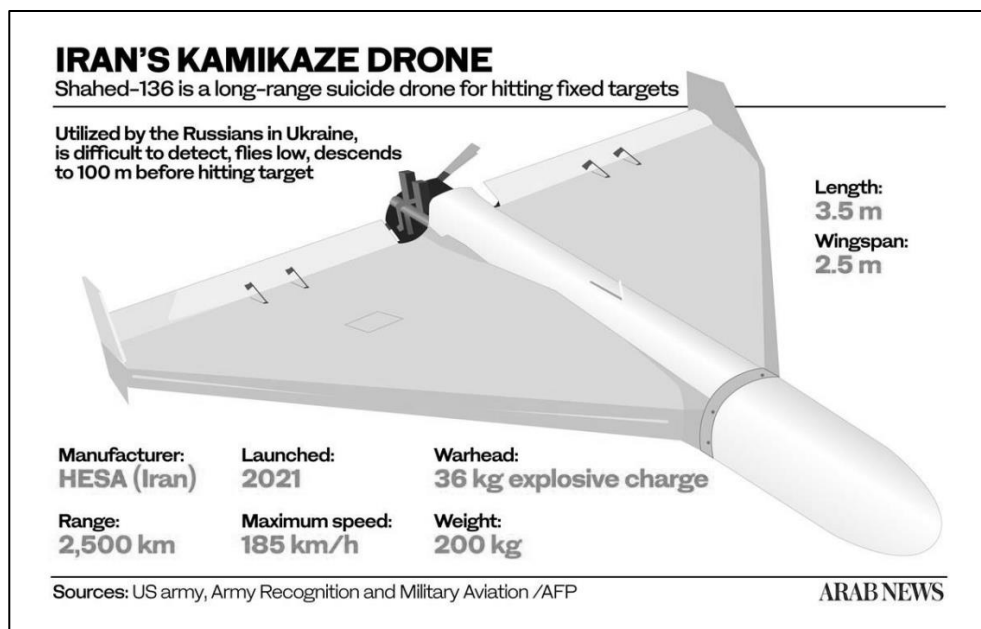
Source: *Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of August 28th, 2023, 3:00 PM ET*, Institute for the Study of War, “ISW Press”, August 2023.

<<https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Bakhmut%20Battle%20Map%20Draft%20August%2028%2C2023.png>> (30.9.2023).

The Battle for Bakhmut at the time of writing this paper, is still ongoing and it has become an attritional conflict with fighting continuing to this very day. As we can see in fig. 2, by August 28th, there was still hostility ongoing in Bakhmut, and despite Russia deploying its ‘force multipliers’ such as Wagner, Drones, and Chechen Figures, it was unable to fully capture the city. This has become long-protracted ground battles, that are continuing this very day – with trench warfare now a common theme. Furthermore following, recent developments, Putin placing Wagner under direct control. The aborted coup attempt by Prigozhin, and his subsequent death has meant that the role of

Wagner is now uncertain. According to the ISW, “Ukrainian officials assessed that any upcoming Russian strike campaign may employ new tactics that use fewer missiles and more drones”²⁵. In addition, ISW, has argued: “Russian command may believe that a large number of strike drones will allow Russian forces to overwhelm Ukrainian air defenses, although Shahed drones remain Russia’s high precision weapon system most vulnerable to Ukrainian air defenses”²⁶.

Figure 3. Shahed-136 Drone



Source: O. Shahbandar, *Drone havoc in Ukraine puts Iran’s asymmetric warfare advantage into sharp relief*, “Arab News”, 21.01.2023, <<https://www.arabnews.com/node/2236621/middle-east>> (30.09.2023).

In terms of the battlespace in the Ukraine conflict, Russian strategy has become adept, in light of the successes of the Kamikaze Drones (see fig. 3), to start its own production lines and supply chains, in order to increase its volume of its weapon systems. According to the “Washington Post” in an article written

²⁵ R. Bailey, K. Stepanenko, K. Wolkov, C. Harward, M. Clark, *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment: August 28, 2023*, Institute for the Study of War, “ISW Press”, 2023, <<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-28-2023>> (30.09.2023).

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

this summer, Russia's "aim is to domestically build 6,000 drones by Summer 2025 – enough to reverse the Russian army's chronic shortage of unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs, on the frontline", with the assistance of Iran²⁷. Furthermore, if successful, it would "thwart Ukraine's effort to retake occupied territory and dramatically advance Moscow's position in the drone arms race that is remaking modern warfare"²⁸.

These recent trends demonstrate that Drones will have an increasingly central role in Russian Grand Strategy, in terms of its projection of military firepower, and also, how this technological innovation will become embedded in Russia's 'way of warfare'. Interesting, "Russia has reportedly begun domestically producing modified versions of Shahed-131/136 drones but is reportedly struggling to produce them at the pace and quality it desires"²⁹. As a result of Russia struggling to create its own domestic production, and is therefore reliant on Iran, for the Shahed Kamikaze Drones.

Both the Ukrainians and the Russians have intensified their use of Drones to wage asymmetric warfare against one another. With the most recent attack by Ukraine against a Russian military airfield on Pskov. The Russians "unleashed the most sustained missile barrage on the Ukrainian capital in months"³⁰. In addition, the Russians launched a barrage of Kamikaze Drones against Kyiv. This demonstrates how this conflict has evolved to become a 'Drone War' from both sides with increased use of Drones to facilitate asymmetric warfare. One of the main benefits of using Drones is that there is no risk of loss to the pilot, and that these (autonomous aerial vehicles) can be operated remotely, from a safe location.

The next section will look at the role of nuclear weapons in Russian Grand Strategy, specifically, in relation to the war in Ukraine. In particular the notion of 'nuclear messaging' as well as 'escalation/de-escalation doctrine'.

The role of nuclear weapons in relation to the war in Ukraine and Russia's grand strategy

One of the key components of Russia's Grand Strategy, is its possession of the largest number of nuclear weapons. Russia, and the wider Kremlin leadership places a premium on the utility and the deterrence factors of nuclear

²⁷ D. Bennet, M. Ilyushina, *Inside the Russian effort to build 6,000 attack drones with Iran's help*, "The Washington Post", 17.08.2023, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2023/08/17/russia-iran-drone-shahed-alabuga/>> (30.09.2023).

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ R. Bailey, K. Stepanenko, K. Wolkov, C. Harward, M. Clark, *op. cit*.

³⁰ Y. Trofimov, *Ukrainian Drones Strike Deep Inside Russia, Hitting Military Airfield, Other Targets*, "The Wall Street Journal", 30.08.2023, <https://www.wsj.com/world/europe/ukrainian-drones-strike-deep-inside-russia-hitting-military-airfield-other-targets-e42ca54?mod=hp_lead_pos8> (30.9.2023).

weapons, specifically, to deter other powers from interfering in its domestic affairs. This goes back to the Cold War, and when the Soviet Union, achieved nuclear parity with the United States. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia still maintains the largest possession of both strategic and tactical nuclear missiles.

First of all, it is important to note that nuclear weapons serve a key role in Russian Grand Strategy. A useful way to understand this can be seen in the following quote by the RAND Corporation, “the ultimate insurance for Russian escalation management is its arsenal of tactical and strategic nuclear weapons”³¹. Furthermore, according to RAND, Russia’s military doctrine means that it may threat to resort to the use of nuclear weapons “in response to a conventional attack that would undermine the regime’s control of the state and threaten Russia’s nuclear deterrent”³². This can be arguably conceived of as the ‘escalation-deescalation’ nuclear doctrine which is what that this section will go onto explore in greater detail.

In terms of nuclear strategy, the United States’ “Nuclear Posture Review” in 2018 argued that “Russia’s national security policies, strategy, and doctrine that include an emphasis on the threat of limited nuclear escalation, and its continuing development and fielding of increasingly diverse and expanding nuclear capabilities”³³.

A working definition of such a concept has been articulated as encompassing the following: “Moscow threatens and exercises limited nuclear first use, suggesting a mistaken expectation that coercive nuclear threats or limited first use could paralyze the United States and NATO and thereby end a conflict on terms favorable to Russia. Some in the United States refer to this as Russia’s ‘escalate to de-escalate’ doctrine. ‘De-escalation’ in this sense follows from Moscow’s mistaken assumption of Western capitulation on terms favorable to Moscow”³⁴.

However, this concept is not new, and was also a part of Soviet Union’s strategic doctrine during the Cold War³⁵. By linking back to the previous section, nuclear weapons also serve another function, and that is to complement ‘hybrid warfare’. This is seen in the context of “the credibility and effectiveness

³¹ S. Boston, D. Massicot, *The Russian Way of Warfare*, RAND Corporation 2017, <<https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE231.html>> (30.09.2023).

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Nuclear Posture Review. Final Report*, U.S. Department of Defense, 02.02.2018, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-nuclear-posture-review-final-report.pdf>, (30.09.2023).

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ J. Ross, *Time to Terminate Escalate to De-Escalate – It’s Escalation Control*, “War on the Rocks” 2018, <<https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/time-to-terminate-escalate-to-de-escalateits-escalation-control/>> (30.09.2023).

of this hybrid warfare campaign was backed up by Russia's potential to use its full spectrum of military capabilities, including conventional and nuclear weapons"³⁶. Previously, during the so called 'frozen conflicts' in the Donbass, "Russia's activities in and around Ukraine have been accompanied by an unprecedented dissemination of nuclear weapons-related information, originated from the 'Kremlin'³⁷. The use of nuclear weapons deterrence, "ensured that NATO countries did not get directly involved in the fight, early in the war Putin invoked the nuclear deterrent"³⁸. Thereby, demonstrating the utility of 'nuclear messaging'.

Since the last decade, Russia has devoted considerable material resources to developing a new generation of ballistic-missile submarines and developing its 'hypersonic missile' capabilities. The United States Department of Defense reported, in 2018, that Russia is investing in upgrading and developing its nuclear capabilities and ballistic missiles. "In addition to modernizing 'legacy' Soviet nuclear systems, Russia is developing and deploying new nuclear warheads and launchers. These efforts include multiple upgrades for every leg of the Russian nuclear triad of strategic bombers, sea-based missiles, and land-based missiles. Russia is developing at least two new intercontinental range systems, a hypersonic guide vehicle, a new intercontinental, nuclear armed, nuclear-powered, undersea autonomous torpedo"³⁹.

The worsening of geopolitical relations between the West and Russia, led to President Putin making a speech. While, on the 21st September Speech announcing 'Partial Mobilisation', Putin also said the following in the context of the West/NATO: "To those who allow themselves such statements regarding Russia, I want to remind you that our country also has various means of destruction, and for separate components and more modern than those of NATO countries and when the territorial integrity of our country is threatened, to protect Russia and our people, we will certainly use all the means at our disposal".

Lastly, changes in Russian Grand Strategy can be seen when the first tactical missiles were redeployed to Belarus. On March 25, 2023, Putin's Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu said the following in relation to the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear missiles in Belarus (fig. 4), during a meeting with his Belorussian counterpart: "The collective West is essentially waging an undeclared war against our countries"⁴⁰.

³⁶ J. Durkalec, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

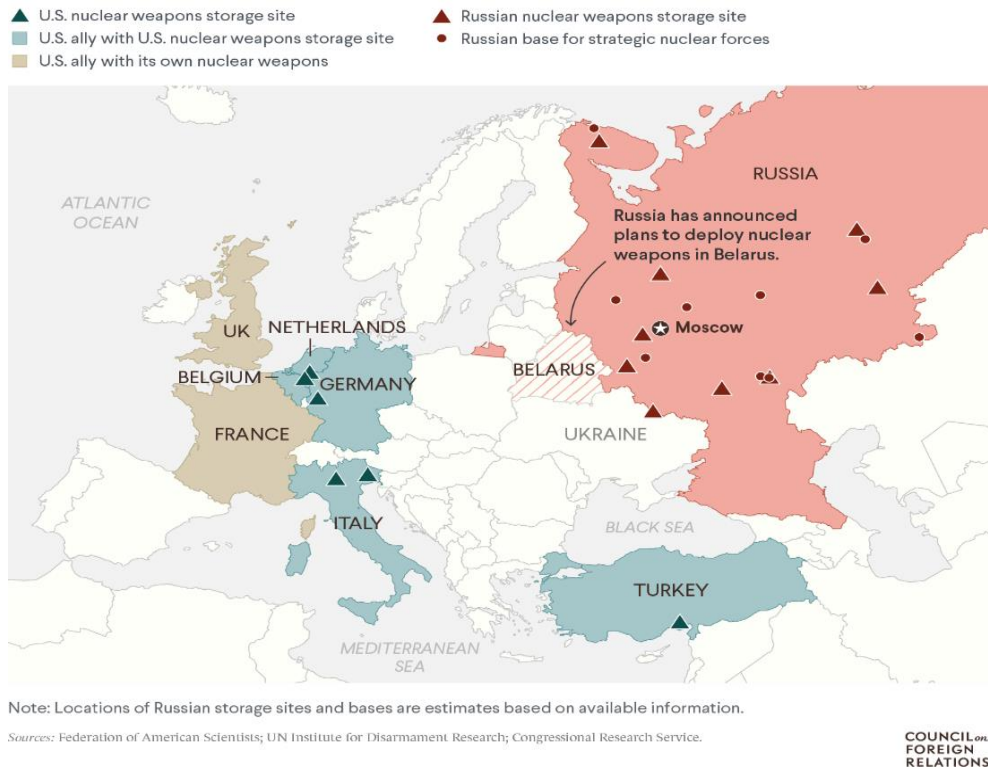
³⁸ L. Freedman, *op. cit.*, p. 395.

³⁹ *Nuclear Posture Review...*

⁴⁰ G. Faulconbridge, *Russia moves ahead with deployment of tactical nukes in Belarus*, "Reuters", 25.05.2023, <<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/russia-belarus-sign-document-tactical-nuclear-weapon-deployment-belarus-2023-05-25/>> (30.9.2023).

Figure 4. Russia announcing plans to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus

Nuclear Weapons in Europe



Source: J. Masters, W. Merrow, *Nuclear Weapons In Europe: Mapping U.S. and Russian Deployments*, Council on Foreign Relations, 30.03.2023, <<https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/nuclear-weapons-europe-mapping-us-and-russian-deployments>> (30.09.2023).

This hardening of the Cold War rhetoric between Russia and NATO, is in direct response to increasing NATO/West military aid given. But, also, this is a sign of how the conflict itself has evolved, coupled with the deterioration of relations with the Atlantic-West (NATO). It is important to understand Russia's strategic nuclear doctrine and how this relates to Russia's overall Grand Strategy. In particular, Russia's 'escalation/de-escalation' Doctrine, which has continued since the days of the Soviet Union. In this context, Russia would escalate with the potential use of nuclear weapons to deescalate a conflict.

Professor Betts⁴¹ offers a very important summary of the role of nuclear weapons in politics in the article "Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance"

⁴¹ S. Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance*, Washington 1987, p. 1.

published by the Brookings Institution. While this was written during the latter stages of the Cold War, during the Gorbachev era of the Soviet Union, this is as applicable today as it was back then: “[Any] official suggestion that nuclear weapons may be used if the dispute is not settled on acceptable terms. Such threats can be signals of intentions – hints through public statements, diplomatic channels, or deliberately leaks about internal discussions or plans. Or they could be signaled through observable preparation or exercising of nuclear capabilities beyond normal peacetime status, indicating greater readiness to execute wartime missions. In general, the latter should seem the potent gesture, on the principle that actions speak louder than words”⁴².

Inside the COBRA meeting in the UK, the military itself believed there was no real risk of a ‘strategic nuclear strike’, as this was deemed “suicidal”. On the other hand, there was a possibility of Putin using a ‘tactical nuclear weapon’⁴³. The French also reached the same conclusion, but if this did indeed happen, it would launch an “overwhelming conventional response but not a nuclear one”⁴⁴. So, to take both of these claims forward, while strategic nuclear missiles was not seen as something that was plausible, given the wider fact that Russian Army was enduring massive casualties, there was a possibility of a tactical nuclear strike. From a nuclear doctrine perspective, these insights from both 10 Downing Street in the UK and in Paris, broadly imply the possible potential of ‘escalation/deescation’ doctrine being used.

There was a continuity in terms of the deemed utility of ‘nuclear messaging’ by the Kremlin, during both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, including in relation Russian Grand Strategy. This is equally as applicable in the context of wider geopolitics of Russia and NATO, in the context of the Ukraine War. One such example of nuclear messaging can be seen in relation to Russian strategic bombers flying close to NATO airspace. Recently, two Russian bear-bombers, a Tu-142 Bear-F and Tu-142 Bear-J aircraft, flew near to Scotland – which resulted in the Royal Air Force dispatching Eurofighter aircraft⁴⁵. British Armed Forces Minister said the following in response to this on 14th August, 2023: “Pilots launched their Typhoon jets to intercept two Russian long-range bombers this

⁴² S. Betts, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁴³ O. Matthews, *Overreach: The Inside Story of Putin’s War Against Ukraine. Revised & Updated Version*, London 2023, p. 238.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 280.

⁴⁵ *Britain says it intercepted two Russian bomber aircraft north of Scotland*, “Reuters”, 14.08.2023, <[48](https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/britain-says-it-intercepted-two-russian-bomber-aircraft-north-scotland-2023-08-14/#:~:text=Britain%20says%20it%20intercepted%20two%20Russian%20bomber%20aircraft%20north%20of%20Scotland,-Reuters&text=LONDON%2C%20Aug%202014%20(Reuters),NATO's%20northern%20air%20policing%20area> (30.09.2023).</p>
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morning, monitoring them as they passed North of the Shetland Islands, ready to counter any potential threat to UK territory”⁴⁶.

Furthermore, NATO policing effort in Estonia has seen more than 50 similar air intercepts were carried out. It is also worth noting that even though the Russian bear bomber was built during the height of the Cold War, it can still deliver nuclear weapons, if necessary, and as such acts as a key instrument in ‘nuclear messaging’.

Furthermore, in relation to the use of ‘nuclear messaging’, President Putin has made repeated claims that he is ready to use whatever means at his disposal. On 21st September, 2022, he said that Russia would indeed use “all available means to protect Russia and our people”⁴⁷.

In terms of wider geopolitics, Russia also escalated its nuclear policies further by suspending its participation in the Nuclear START Treaty, with Putin saying the following: “They want to inflict a strategic defeat on us and claim our nuclear facilities... In this regard, I am forced to state that Russia is suspending its participation in the strategic offensive arms treaty”⁴⁸.

To conclude, in terms of Russian Grand Strategy, nuclear weapons serve an important role in geostrategy. In the context of Russia’s national security, nuclear weapons a deterrence against threats from the West, but also serves as a tool for Great Power Politics, and overall geostrategy. A continuity of which was seen during the Cold War, when Russia was part of the Soviet Union, and this continues to this day. Historically, the notion of Great the Soviet Union was a nuclear armed superpower that had achieved strategic parity in terms of military capabilities, and nuclear weapons capabilities in the late 1970s onwards. While it is arguably the case that Russia is not a Superpower anymore, it is a Great Power in the sense that it is a nuclear power and does possess the largest number of nuclear weapons. It is only logic, based upon this structural position, in international politics, that the Kremlin leadership, and President Putin in particular, would refer to such capabilities in their discourse about the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The next section will now go onto summarise the latest Ukrainian counter-offensive and its interaction with Russian Grand Strategy, before I summarise in a succinct manner, the Conclusion.

⁴⁶ *RAF Typhoon jets intercept Russian bombers flying north of Scotland*, Ministry of Defence, “MOD.GOV.UK” 2023, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/raf-typhoon-jets-intercept-russian-bombers-flying-north-of-scotland>> (30.09.2023).

⁴⁷ G. Faulconbridge, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ A. Roth, J. Borger, *Putin says Russia will halt participation in the New Start nuclear arms treaty*, “The Guardian”, 21.02.2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/21/putin-russia-halt-participation-new-start-nuclear-arms-treaty#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThey%20want%20to%20inflict%20a,by%20grievances%20against%20the%20west%20>>> (30.09.2023).

The Ukrainian counter-offensive and Russian grand strategy

This section will go into brief detail about the Ukrainian counter-offensive and Russian Grand Strategy. During the late Autumn to Summer 2023, the Ukrainian counter-offensive was launched. While this was much anticipated, as a response to Russia's own counter-offensive one thing that is revealing, is the lack of progress that has been made. At most, only limited territorial gains have been made, and there has not been a break-through.

In the wider context of the prosecution of the conflict, the Ukrainian counter-offensive has not made as much headway, with the images of charred wreckage of Ukrainian-driven Leopard II and Abrams fighting vehicles attests to. The Russian military strategy has become 'defense in-depth' with lines of minefields and fortifications⁴⁹ all constructed to slow the Ukrainian advance and cause heavy losses. What this points to is a long 'attritional conflict', and while the Russians have indeed have already become more limited in its policy options by material limitations and military losses, this may also be true for the Ukrainians. Therefore, no one can make any generalized assumptions other than this conflict will continue to be a long-protracted gruelling ground-war that will continue to consume both manpower and material on both sides, leaving ever-higher casualties.

Furthermore, even the U.S. intelligence secretly doubted that the Ukrainians will be able to make great advances in its counter-offensive⁵⁰. In these leaked documents, quoted by the "Washington Post", says that the combination of Russia's in-depth defenses, and "enduring Ukrainian deficiencies in training and munitions supplies probably will strain progress and exacerbate casualties during the offensive"⁵¹.

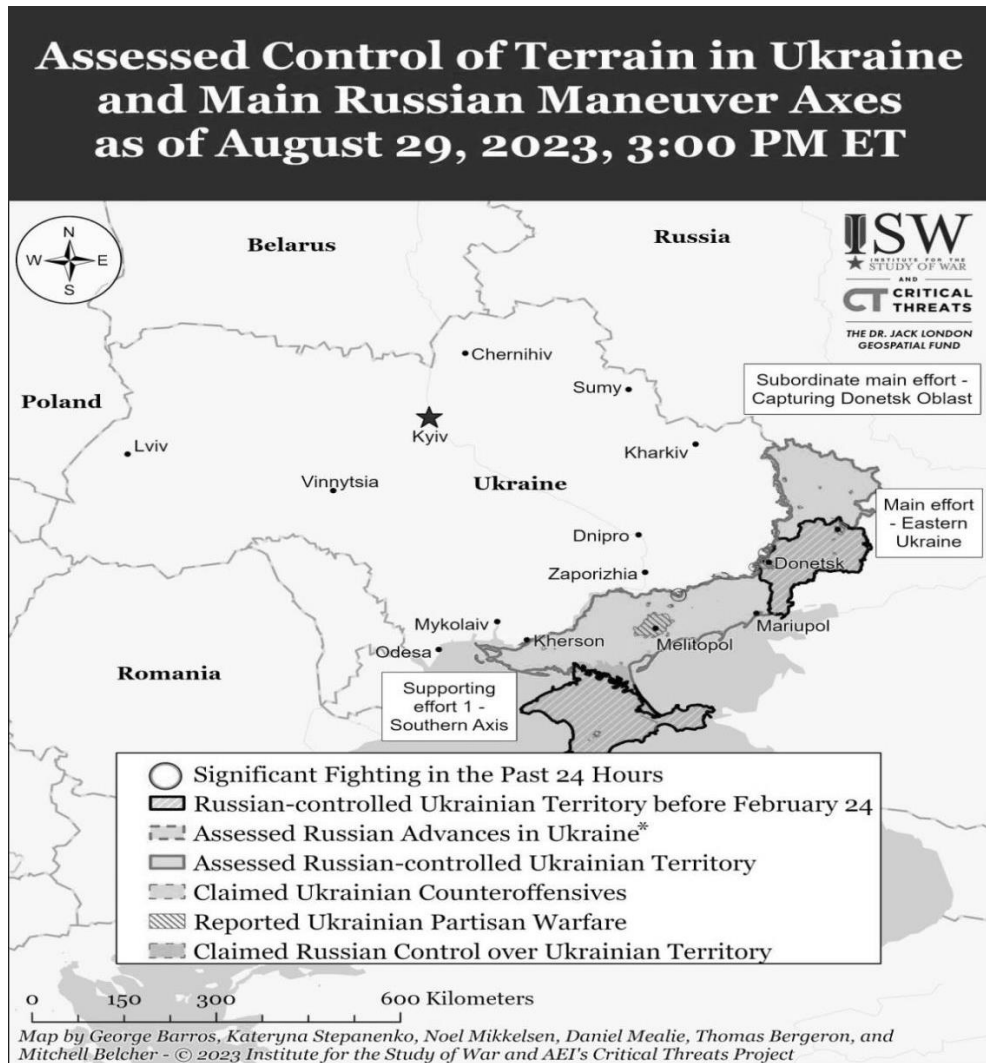
As of this month, the Ukrainian counteroffensive is still ongoing, while there have some speculated that "time is not on their side". The Russians are likely to demonstrate greater continuity in their defensive attacks. However, in terms of the military situation, as of August 29th 2023, the frontlines as seen in fig. 5 have not changed considerably, and has remained largely static.

⁴⁹ A. Taylor, J. Ledur, F. Ebel, M. Ilyushina, *A web of trenches show Russia fears losing Crimea*, "The Washington Post", 03.04.2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2023/ukraine-russia-crimea-battle-trenches/?itid=hp-top-table-main_p001_f001&itid=lk_inline_manual_10> (30.09.2023).

⁵⁰ A. Horton, I. Khurshudyan, S. Oakford, *U.S. doubts Ukraine counteroffensive will yield big gains, leaked document says*, "The Washington Post", 10.04.2023, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/10/leaked-documents-ukraine-counteroffensive/>> (30.09.2023).

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

Figure 5. The Latest Strategic Situation in Ukraine



Source: K. Stepanenko, K. Wolkov, A. Evans, C. Harward, F. W. Kagan, *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment*, Institute for the Study of War, "ISW Press", 29.08.2023, <<https://understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-29-2023>> (30.09.2023).

What implications does this have on Russian Grand Strategy. First and foremost, the Russians are preparing for a long-war of Attrition. Already the Kremlin has increased its military spending, and the military leadership has stated that they are preparing to fight this war until the year 2025 at least, if not

even longer. As the botched coup by Prigozhin, and his death has translated to continuation of President Putin's leadership at the Kremlin, there has not been a fundamental change in Russia's strategy or approach. It is arguably the case, as put forward in this article, that Russian Grand Strategy has become one of continuity, rather than any substantial change. Next, this article will present its main findings in a succinct manner, in the Conclusion.

Conclusion

In summary, it is arguably the case put forward in this paper, that Russian Grand Strategic aims and objectives have not remained static and have evolved based on the changing nature of events on the ground in the battlefield as well as the decisions made by President Putin. The tenacity of the Ukrainian resolve to defend its territory was not predicted by Moscow and, as such, Kremlin decision makers, including Putin himself, did not predict the Ukrainian response. Consequently, this impacted upon its overall initial military objectives accordingly, and because of the tenacity of the Ukrainian defenders, armed with Western- weaponry, meant that Russia failed to achieve a majority of its initial objectives.

The context of (mis)perception of the Ukrainian resolve to resist Russian aggression can be attributed to the following factors. Firstly, Putin's erroneous belief that the Ukrainians would welcome Russian troops and the overarching belief of 'denazification', as well as the perception that Ukrainians and Russians share a national identity. This proved to be false. Secondly, Russian intelligence failures were seen in not predicting (a) the political resolve of President Zelensky to continue the war, (b) the sheer tenacity of the Ukrainian defenders to exact enormous casualties on the Russians, and (c) the West's willingness to supply 'weaponry' to Kyiv.

Putin's decision to inaugurate a 'partial mobilization' was based in part on 'path dependency', and how a series of military setbacks has triggered the need to increase the number of soldiers to be surged into the conflict, in order to arrest the military setbacks. Furthermore, Russia was unable to continue the conflict without a considerable injection of troops, and President Putin was not able to extricate Russia out of the conflict, as he had invested so much political capital in the 'special military operation'. Therefore, 'partial mobilization' became the only course of action, viable, to be pursued.

Additionally, Russia's annexation and incorporation of territory, signals both a consolidation of objectives due to the lack of progress made on the battlefield, and also a change in the political objectives sought. Accordingly, the consolidation of these four regions into the Russian Federation was presented as a positive outcome from the war, despite the failures and strategic

(mis)steps that were evident during the initial operational phase of Russia's 'special military operation'.

Furthermore, in terms of the lack of policy alternatives following Russia's strategic misstep, it is now locked into a long-protracted ground war with no real other recourse of action, due to 'path dependency'. However, I argue that Russia has already experienced 'Strategic Defeat', and as such has not been able to achieve its preferred political outcomes, with both sides locked into a brutal war of attrition. Therefore, President Putin became increasingly 'boxed in' in terms of his policy options, and had to surge his commitments towards a more narrower objective, namely that of the 'partial mobilization'. Furthermore, there is a wider geopolitical aspect related to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, and that is relations between Russia and the West. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has sparked a deterioration of relations between the West and Russia. Thus, the Russo-Ukrainian War has become a 'proxy war', between the West/NATO and Russia.

In terms of strategic 'retrenchment', President Putin opted for incremental increases in 'resources' in the form of 'partial mobilizations' to replace its losses, while also utilizing asymmetric means such as cyber, and also Drone warfare is complementary to attritional warfare at low cost.

However, in terms of whether Putin would authorize the use of nuclear weapons, an important caveat needs to be made. Although I argue it is therefore unlikely it is not entirely inconceivable, based on the notion of the 'escalation-de-escalation' doctrine, that there would be a scenario that would increase the risks of Russian nuclear weapons used. A case study shows that if Russia was subjected to a significant military defeat on the battlefield, it may, although unlikely resort to the following extraordinary measures including: (a) Tactical nuclear weapon? (b) Dirty Bomb (c) False Flag. This paper does not give an indication that this would likely be the case. The more probable course of action is the continued nuclear 'sabre rattling' from the Kremlin, as well as the redeployment of battlefield 'tactical' weapons.

As this paper has demonstrated, the overall battlespace has not changed significantly following the Ukrainian counter-offensive, the Russians have since redeployed to their main effort in Eastern Ukraine and the Southern Axis. However, while Ukraine's counter-offensive has only made limited gains, it is still in a period of flux.

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