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BY: Capt Ben Smith, RIFLES

WHOSE SIDE IS TIME ON?

RUSSIA'S failure to execute a swift 'Special Military Operation' prompted them to narrow their foci. Their reorganisation has not overwhelmed the Western-backed Armed Forces of Ukraine, but Russia's concentration of force in Southern Ukraine will be extremely difficult to dislodge. The adversarial nature of war means that the operational initiative will swing, but the grinding strategic stalemate is likely to continue unless something changes. This protraction will make time an increasingly important factor and, although it cannot be controlled, it may be possible to exploit its entropic effects

on other factors. This paper will analyse how some factors are affected by time and who this favours. This may prompt decision makers to consider time as a 'flank' to exploit.

THE KNOCKOUT BLOW

Russia premised their 'Special Military Operation' on time being on Ukraine's side. The invasion of Crimea showed that rapid deployments could achieve swift victories with few casualties. Their confidence in orchestrating a successful palace coup is underscored by the success Putin's KGB contemporaries had in 1979 when they toppled Afghan General Secretary Amin within 24 hours. Simultaneously, they would be cognisant of the possibility that significant

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Western support could eventually materialise, making any campaign increasingly costly in blood and treasure. This placed time on Ukraine's side: if they could endure, costs to Russia would increase.

[Sharpe](#) posits Putin is rational and contemplated lessons from the past while considering his pre-invasion intelligence. The problem was the distorted intelligence.

The sclerotic bureaucracy of the Russian state apparatus is a barrier to objectivity. Individuals self-censor and "seek opportunities to develop and implement ideas they think will please the boss, based on hints."¹ This means intelligence

was filtered through an overly optimistic lens. So, when the Ninth Directorate of the Fifth Service of the FSB polled Ukraine's population in Feb 2022 and reported a population disaffected with Ukrainian politicians the report no doubt made it to [Putin's desk](#). Reynolds and Watling's deduction is that it indicates Ukrainians are mistrustful of power, so Russia would struggle to govern them. Their logical deduction is unlikely to have been reached by the Russian intelligence services keen to please Putin. It appears this failure is being punished, as the head of the Fifth Service FSB, Beseda, and his deputy, Bolyukh, are both facing [charges of embezzlement](#).

Putin also isolated himself from advisors offering critical perspectives and privileged the hawkish advice of his National Security Advisor Patrushev.² This is a marked departure from Putin's early years and from the Soviet Union which had serious debate in the Politburo.

The aggregate distortion meant a miscalculation that Russia could achieve a swift *coup de main* of Kyiv. Putin understood this was a time-sensitive operation and he switched tack when he realised he could not achieve a swift victory in Kyiv. This indicates Putin's appreciation of the importance of exploiting time-sensitive opportunities and that he must back off when things are not in his favour.

AUTOCRACY VS DEMOCRACY

Kilcullen describes Putin's approach as liminal warfare in which subversive Russian actions bubble below the threshold of war, occasionally spiking above it.³ The brevity of the violence gets inside the OODA loop

¹Galeotti. *We Need to Talk About Putin*. P. 20.

²BBC Radio 4. *Analysis. The Court of Putin*. Mar 21.

³Kilcullen. *The Dragons and the Snakes*.



Picture: FADEL SENNA/APP

“UKRAINIAN RESISTANCE HAS DEFEATED PUTIN’S OPENING GAMBIT AND PROVIDED THE TIME FOR THE WEST TO COHERE ITSELF. UNFORTUNATELY, A MORE PROTRACTED TIMELINE MAY ALSO FAVOUR AN AUTOCRATIC REGIME.”

of democracies who arrive at decisions through democratic and often bureaucratic processes. By the time these processes have kicked in, the level of violence may have dropped, making it difficult for democracies to coalesce around a unified response. These processes are integral to governance as they help objective information flow to decision makers at the same time as providing scrutiny and oversight of the decisions. The issue is that their tardiness presents an opportunity which the *Judoka*-style autocrat Putin exploits through rapid strategic shifts. Democracies struggle to match this unless they are faced with an existential threat like Ukraine is. Ukrainian resistance has defeated Putin's opening gambit and provided the time for the West to cohere itself. Unfortunately, a more protracted timeline may also favour an autocratic regime.

The existential threat posed to Ukraine means its will to fight is higher than Western resolve may be to support them in that fight. Over time this support will likely atrophy as electorates prioritise domestic issues over the preservation of the Rules

Based International System. UK concern over Defence and Security is already waning as [concern for the economy increases](#) [accessed 18 May 2022]. The swing of concern in a *demos* is balanced by the continuity of representative democracy; providing some stability for the election cycle. Nevertheless, the episodic revision of political priorities is at risk of exploitation by Putin who outlasts leaders of democracies.

Despite Putin's freedoms, he still runs a “managed democracy” where [mollification of the electorate is important](#). Starting wars increases his popularity but this support decays in [time](#). As Soviet involvement in Afghanistan showed, a rising body count increases domestic pressure to withdraw. Putin will be cognisant of his 2024 election as a point when domestic pressure to withdraw may grow. The significance of this year is amplified by US and UK elections. This could mean a shift to vote-winning domestic policies or a reinvigoration of nationalism focussing on the dangerous other. Either way, 2024 is an inflection point for Russia, USA and UK which will

affect their Ukraine strategies. So, while Putin can exploit narrow windows of time better than others, his reliance on domestic consent to lead makes his advantage less definitive over time.

SANCTIONS

The substantial Western sanctions on Russia, including the [UK's largest ever package](#), will gradually increase pressure on the Russian economy but the net effect is unclear. Sanctions succeed 30% of the time in changing a regime or impairing military capability but the [unprecedented scale](#) of these sanctions may boost the [odds of succeeding](#).

The economic uncertainty may already have created a minor exodus from Russia, with 3.8 million Russians leaving in the first quarter of 2022. [The Moscow Times](#) indicated that countries bordering Russia saw a spike in the number of Russians coming to them in comparison to the same period in 2021, with Georgia experiencing a fivefold increase. This is not the full picture, however, as international travel is still recovering post COVID and despite the fivefold

jump in the number of Russians travelling to Georgia in the first quarter of 2022 this is still four times less than in the [first quarter of 2018](#).

The extent to which travel from Russia has recovered post COVID is still unclear, as are the longer-term effects of sanctions. Some commentators have questioned the effectiveness of the current sanctions as Russia heads towards a [record trade surplus](#). This belies the fact the trade surplus is caused by their lack of ability to buy anything, including war supplies. Therefore, although they are selling energy, they are unable to buy goods, including essential components for [high-end equipment](#). So, in the short term they are building their reserves but unable to spend it. In time, the impact of sanctions will increase, with the most severe consequences due in 1-2 quarters.

Some speculate that sanctions will force oligarchs to apply pressure to Putin to change course. This fails to understand the nature of Putin's power and his relation to the oligarchs. Firstly, Putin keeps the oligarchs at arm's length with only the closet of the *Siloviki* having any influence. Secondly, Putin privileges the advice of the security apparatus over that of the economists. Another view is that the crippling sanctions will force a palace coup, but the stringent security measures of the FSO and the lack of any

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credible successor make it hopeful thinking, not a theory of change. As the strongest political elements outside of Putin's people are even harder-line far-right elements it is also not an avenue the West should pursue.

It is more likely sanctions will galvanise support for Putin. History has shown that Russians have a higher threshold for hardship than most Westerners. This may be because they lack effective means to express their discontent until it eventually results in dramatic revolutions, like in 1990 and 1917, but this is unlikely whilst Putin has such a sympathetic media. As the Russian people begin to feel the pain of the sanctions it will only justify Putin's claims that the West wants to destroy Russia and [solidify domestic support](#). Indeed, early polling shows that since he launched the 'Special Military Operation' [Putin's popularity has increased](#).

This indicates that the effects of the sanctions are complex. They will degrade Russia's military capabilities but also galvanise Russia's opposition to the West. The net result is sanctions will not have an immediate significant impact, but as time elapses their impact will increase; both favourably

for Ukraine by crippling Russia's military and favourably for Putin by entrenching anti-Western sentiment in Russia.

DEMOGRAPHY

Russia's declining population not only compounds the economic issues but also reduces the workforce available to fight. The longer the war, the bigger the drain on Russia's resources, both economic and human. As 350-500 Russians die each day in Ukraine, the cumulative impact of these losses over time will become [significant](#). The average number of British soldiers who died each day over [WW2](#) was 185. The political impact of losses has been mentioned, but it may also have a decisive effect in terms of the demographics. The impact of Russia's low fertility rate since the 90s was exacerbated by COVID, of which Putin was slow to acknowledge the severity. This means Russia can ill afford to sustain high losses; especially those of the ages deployed in Ukraine.

There is even an argument that the pressure of a declining population was a contributing factor to Putin's decision to invade Ukraine; [to increase Russia's population](#). Either way, Putin is aware of the demographic issues facing the

country and their impact on his ambitions. When these factors are compounded by emigration the demographics of Russia pose a serious threat to Putin's ability to wage war. The impact of this demographic decline is only likely to increase with time.

TIME: AN ELUSIVE ALLY

Time continues to be an elusive ally and only a feature of other decisive elements, but its importance is clear. As it elapses, the implications of the factors we have explored change and swing in favour of different actors. Sanctions may be a double-edged sword over time, and while autocracy retains some advantages in terms of their speed of decision making these advantages reduce over time. There are other important factors not considered here such as Putin's sense of mortality. While it is unclear which, if any of these factors, will prove decisive in the medium term, unless there is a significant change of course the slow but inevitable impact of demography will become increasingly relevant over time. Thus, it appears in Ukraine's interests to simply stay in the fight causing as many casualties as possible. They do not need to take territory back, but rather to exploit the difficult and elusive flank that is time.

“Thus, though we cannot make our sun. Stand still, yet we will make him run.” –A. Marvell



Staunch defence: A Ukrainian multiple rocket launcher BM-21 “Grad” shells Russian troops’ position, near Lugansk, in the Donbas region, on April 10, 2022. Picture: Anatolii Stepanov/AFP via Getty Images