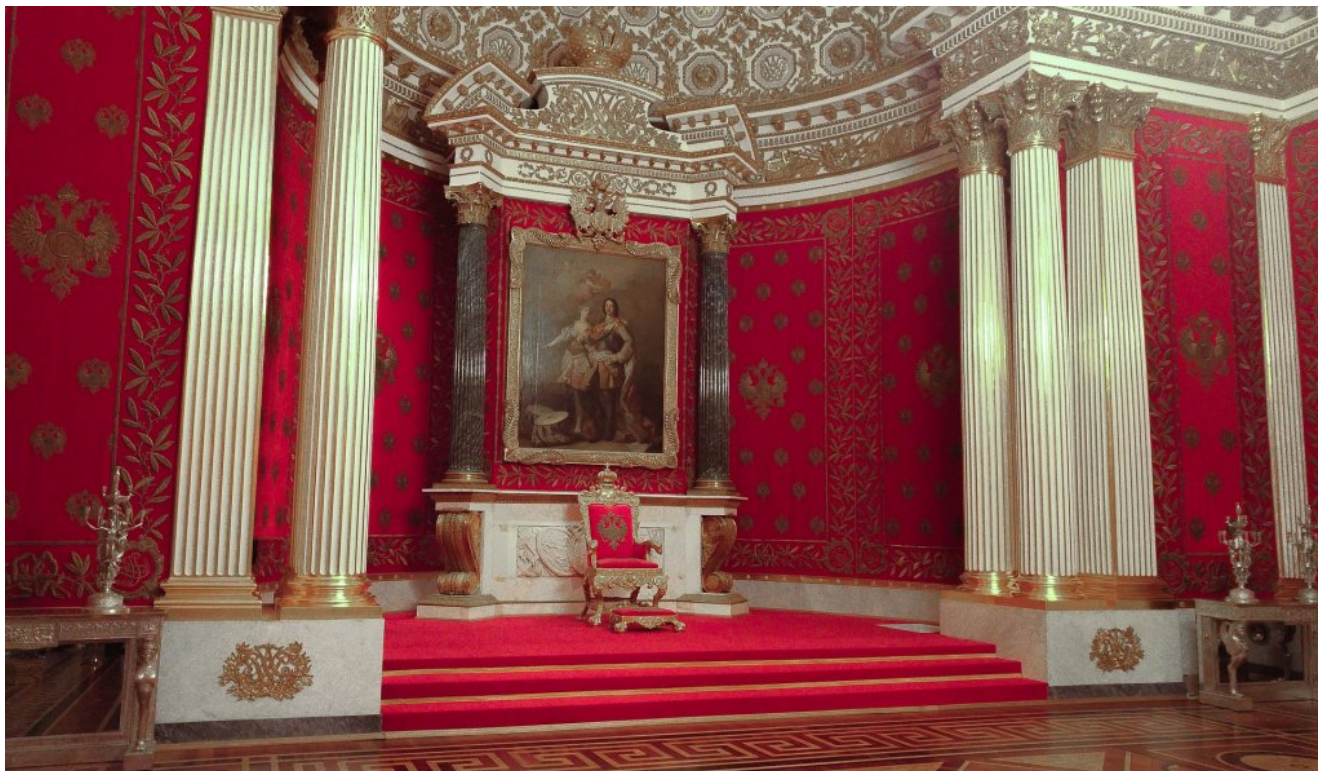


Putin's War is Stuck, Beware The Rising Risks- Pavel K. Baev



Data on the concentration of Russian troops was solid; the diplomatic offensive executed by Moscow was deliberately disagreeable; yet, many experts (myself including) refused to accept the proposition on the coming war as “inevitable”. Denials streaming from the Kremlin were never convincing, but President Vladimir Putin’s reputation as a shrewd pragmatist still clashed with the forecasts that he could commit a blunder of such monumental proportions. In the matter of five days, if not already in day one of the full-blown hostilities, it has become clear that the scale of obstacles and damage goes far beyond the unduly optimistic risk-calculus in Moscow.

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(who has a place of prominence in Russian strategic culture) knows that wars rarely go according to plans; this one, however, never had a chance to register a success. Its basic assumptions on own strength and enemy's weaknesses are too deeply flawed, and Putin's underlying proposition that Ukraine is not a real state, but just an "artificial construct" that would collapse under direct pressure, is inevitably proven wrong. His courtiers were afraid to say a word of disagreement, but the top brass should have known better than to kowtow to the Commander-in-Chief. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu is the only person in the Kremlin court with own reputation and support base, and he saw plenty of man-made disasters in his previous job as minister for emergencies. General Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the General Staff, gained fame for his theorizing on "hybrid wars", but he knew that Russian army has only limited experience in and capacity for fighting a large-scale conventional war. Both, however, opted to report readiness for conquering Ukraine, and now have to answer for the setbacks.

If Putin's track

record in power projection experiments tells us anything about this extraordinary crisis, it is that he is set to double the stakes and blame the West for the severe consequences. The latter is partly true, even if the main cause of the derailment of Russian war plans is the fierce resistance of Ukrainian army as well as civilian population. Putin has clearly miscalculated the strength of NATO unity and the US leadership, expecting only modest sanctions and plentiful lamentations. Now he has to respond not only to the debilitating distortion of Russian financial system, but also to such punishing measures as the possible closure of the Turkish Straits to the Russian Navy. The response quite probably would involve curtailing or even complete stop to the supplies of Russian natural gas to Europe, but this is hardly going to undermine the NATO resolve.

Putin's stakes in

this unwinnable and unnecessary war cannot be higher, and he needs to demonstrate decisive success in the shortest possible time, before the heroic Ukrainian resistance and expanding Western engagement with it undercut the far

from solid domestic support for the aggression. The Kremlin has taken the ability to suppress all anti-war protests for granted, and repressions can indeed be intensified, but nothing resembling a “patriotic mobilization” can be orchestrated. This may turn out to be the most serious of miscalculations, and the only way to negate it available for the war cabal in Moscow is to deliver something resembling a victory, first of all in Kyiv and Kharkiv. Massive use of airpower is necessary for breaking the defenses in these major urban centers, and this upping of brutality is certain to bring more outrage in and punishing measures from the West.

Pushed in the corner, Putin may resort to desperate manoeuvres and opt for brandishing his much-advertised nuclear instruments, first of all non-strategic weapons. A strike remains in the domain of unthinkable, but deploying nuclear warheads to Crimea and moving them on board of combat ships are steps that could be executed already in the next week. Western politicians and Russia’s neighbours to the South and East need to take measure of the risks that until the outbreak of the first major war in Europe in 75 years appeared too high to contemplate. The most immediate task is clear: to help Ukraine to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Ukrainian stand for the right cause, and every day that the defiant yellow-blue flag keeps flying over Kyiv brings their victory closer. Putin’s regime is unlikely to survive the humiliating defeat, and this sets up the next, and perhaps even more difficult task: to ensure that this breakdown would not signify a catastrophe for Russia and an unmitigated disaster for the world.



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