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The state that war built

Battlefield success, innovative technology and plans for future warfare mean little if the Kremlin cannot guarantee its own political stability

As protracted trilateral negotiations between the US, Russia and Ukraine continue over some sort of negotiated end to the war in Ukraine, it is worth considering some of the pressures that Moscow is contending with, and how these factor in to its longer-term security and political thinking.

Economic pressure on Russia, in the form of variously targeted and sweeping sanctions and with the aim of applying sufficient pressure to prompt a policy rethink on the war, has thus far not been sufficient to shift the Kremlin's mindset. This is due to a variety of historical and psychological factors about attitudes towards mass casualties in warfare, control of information and powerful narratives that shape many of Russia's misfortunes as a result of western interference, rather than structural weaknesses. But Moscow's war aims remain largely the same, with the ultimate goal of subjugating Ukraine to its political and military will.

Perhaps more overlooked by the West, Russia is thinking long term. Irrespective of a timeline for the end of the war in Ukraine, Russia is increasingly preoccupied by its own ability to militarily reconstitute, learn lessons from many stages of the conflict including the invasion itself, and innovate its defence industrial complex. This means that preparing for future warfare, and attempting to understand the nature of the current and evolving Russian military threat - as well as the speed at which Russia will be able to bolster its forces and hardware given its depletion on the battlefield - will be essential for NATO partners.

But to do this, Russia will have to work through various pressing economic, domestic and policy challenges, which will have implications for its geopolitical decision-making, and therefore its ability to reconfigure its military forces.

Russia's military reconstitution

First, Russia must consider how to reform its defence industrial complex to meet its future needs, as a result of its economic and military decision-making. Defence spending remains high at around 6 per cent of GDP. But the injection of state capital at the start of the war in 2022, which prompted skewed investment figures and suggested a healthy and dynamic market has started to trail off, with only weak growth predicted for 2026 of around 0.8 per cent. Policy decisions to convert civilian industries into military manufacturing that operate 24/7 mean that the industrial base is already at capacity, with little wiggle room.

Second, Russia must contend with important supply chain gaps that the war has laid bare and exacerbated. Moscow has historically relied on Belarus and Ukraine to act as its heavy industries base. Russia's loss of Ukraine in 2014-15 following its annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of fighting in the east meant the simultaneous erosion of its relationships with Ukraine's defence industry manufacturing plants. Belarus' isolation from the international supply chain as a 'co-aggressor' in the Ukraine war has created numerous supply chain gaps and affected its ability to repair and support Russia's defence manufacturing industry at the pace required. Western sanctions had the unintended consequence of forcing deeper alliances between Russia and other belligerents such as Belarus, North Korea and Iran. All of which are contributing in some material way to the prolongation of the Ukraine war, either with the supply of troops, hardware or ammunitions. But while these important relationships meet a current pragmatic need and have little to do with shared ideology, they are vulnerable to political change - as in Iran – or economic pressures – which Belarus suffers from – as well as sanctions pressure, which in part prevents China from contributing sufficient resources to move the dial on the war in Russia's favour.

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Third, political decision-making has influenced the defence industrial complex's ability to innovate. Since the war began, there has been a creeping state takeover of smaller corporations in metallurgy, logistics and transport in the name of strategic security, centralising decision-making and stifling innovation in many of the smaller defence companies. Infighting between ministries vying for power, finances and influence will stymie innovation in favour of bulkier state-controlled corporations, which will limit Russia's flexibility in defence.

Fourth, policy priorities around defence spending and new kinds of military thought about how future wars will be fought will dictate how the Russian military evolves. Russia is predominantly a land warfare power – with some air and maritime forces that were severely depleted by the war – and is likely to continue to invest in large armies capable of fighting attritive wars. President Putin himself has called for a standing army of at least 1.5m men, many of whom will be engaged in a variety of tasks during peacetime including policing borders, infrastructure and maintaining order. But Putin and other influential military thinkers in the Ministry of Defence are also interested in modern ways of doing warfare such as robotics, autonomous drone systems and using AI systems for targeting and improving command and control systems. The prioritisation of financial resources and interests will impact on the nature of the threat from the Russian military in future.

Pressing domestic concerns

But battlefield success, innovative technology and plans for future warfare mean little if the Kremlin cannot guarantee its own political stability. The war has become the entire organisational logic of Putin's system, including the reconfiguration of elite relationships, patronage networks and the prioritisation of funding. This means that any conclusion of the fighting will have significant domestic implications, and the Kremlin is currently preoccupied by several domestic political concerns that are tied to the war.

State Duma elections are coming up in September – these determine the make-up of the Lower House of parliament, and are a benchmark of the success of United Russia, Putin's own party. While elections can be engineered and results massaged, even the Kremlin requires a degree of public buy-in and voter turnout for legitimacy. The Kremlin has always taken an interest in public opinion on sensitive political issues and so conducts its own polls of the public – with the usual caveats about how respondents answer them – about their views of the war, peace negotiations and Ukraine. Indeed, most public polls, including the Levada Centre – the last remaining independent organisation – note consistently that the Russian public in principle supports a negotiated end to the war, but not one that involves ceding any land won.

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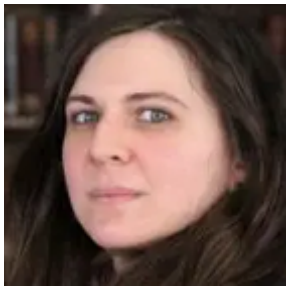
Part of this discussion is about how, or indeed whether, to integrate returning veterans from the war. Putin has over-inflated plans to bring them into politics, with very limited regional success and strong pushback by long-standing

fighters are contending with.

politicians to keep them out of power. There are few social nets available to address many of the physical and mental health issues that former fighters are contending with, and there is a risk that many disenchanted and well trained veterans could pose a security risk, particularly if they are absorbed by the flourishing far-right movements that have seen a resurgence since the war began.

Naturally, the elections are unlikely to produce any serious surprises or resurgent opposition figures – the authorities will ensure this – but they will be an important benchmark of public dissatisfaction with the ruling elite, and will give a sense as to the Kremlin's priorities for the coming years.

All of these preoccupations will have important policy implications for Moscow, and Russia's ability to militarily evolve while simultaneously preserving domestic stability. The Kremlin's internal debate about whether to invest in overwhelming force or artificial intelligence; whether to relax Soviet-style centralisation to permit greater innovation; how to bridge supply chain gaps amid geopolitical turmoil, and how to ensure domestic and regional control while maintaining a modicum of public support, will continue to shape Russia's interactions with both partners and adversaries across the world.



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