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Putin's Legitimacy is the Strategic Target

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Thursday, December 7, 2023 • 2 min read

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The war between Russia and Ukraine will almost certainly spread to include isolated incidents decided inside Russia's territory as well as attacks upon Russian military and commercial shipping on the Black Sea. Lacking either the capability or capacity to push Russia's forces from the Crimea and four oblasts—Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhia—which taken together represent nearly twenty percent of the Ukraine's sovereign territory, it is likely that Ukraine will increasingly employ asymmetric tactics to attack Russian territory and interests in a strategic attempt to spread pain and suffering to Russia's citizens to bring political pressure upon Vladimir Putin and his oligarchic supporters.

The key questions to be considered are whether such actions on the part of Ukraine will trigger a vertical escalation of the war, the use of tactical nuclear weapons, and whether the use of those capabilities might either endanger or extend to NATO nations. These questions must be considered carefully and against the broader backdrop of Putin's political objectives.

Ukraine has not been successful in its campaign to drive Russian forces from its sovereign territory. While the lines have shifted to create areas of Russian vulnerability, there have been no significant advances of Ukrainian positions over the past year. Russia is dug in with well-fortified locations. However, the Russian loci are vulnerable. The eastern portion of Ukraine that Russia occupies does not possess strong logistical lines of communications.

Furthermore, Putin, sensing his political vulnerability at home, has deliberately not mobilized his nation to spread the burden of war more evenly across his population. For this reason, Putin has recently been attempting to reconstitute the mercenary forces previously under the control of the Wagner Group, perhaps his most combat effective military force, to strengthen his position without expanding conscription, expending resources, or raising taxes.

It is because of this Russian vulnerability, Putin's political position at home, that Ukraine will look to expand the war horizontally by attacking targets on Russian territory and Russian interests. Utilizing special forces and recently acquired long range missiles, Ukraine will attempt to attack targets in Russia, and not just military targets. It will seek to attack crucial nodes of the Russian economy to include communications networks, grain supplies, and even energy installations.

It will be for this reason that Ukraine will consider attacking Russian merchant shipping upon the Black Sea, reasoning that if it cannot ship its grain, Russia should be blocked from doing so as well. However, we should expect that Ukraine will expand its operations to include asymmetric attacks, to include the destruction of critical economic, political, and military nodes, far away from its territory. Russia is a vast country, covering eleven time zones. Special Operations Forces teams are small, and their weapons are small arms, explosives, unmanned drones, petty cash, clean passports, and commercial plane tickets. They will spread out.

Putin will bluster. He will rattle his nuclear saber as he has done repeatedly over the past year, but the armed rebellion of Yevgeny Prigozhin in June 2023, and the lack of a Russian military response as Prigozhin's forces rolled north, highlight a truth not spoken out loud in Moscow: Putin is vulnerable. He made a huge mistake in Ukraine, and leaders in Moscow's state-within-a-state elite already believe that he will be replaced. It is for this reason that Putin has moved to shore up his position with the nation's military leadership, but even here the former KGB officer and Saint Petersburg city administrator is on shaky ground. His military decisions not only revealed deep weaknesses within the Russian military, but they have also dried up lucrative sources of income for Russia's senior officers, the same leaders who hold the keys and firing pins for weapons that Putin may well desire to use. What these leaders fear most is that a vertical expansion of the war might create a casus belli for a NATO intervention in the conflict, led by nations like Poland who want to do more, that may well fully expose the full extent of rot and decay in the Russian military and state.

Voices in the West will soon increase their calls for a negotiated end to the war. Ukraine will rightly reject these calls, and President Joe Biden will need to decide what to do next. But that decision will have broader strategic implications for the world and the United States' position within it. Biden should base his decision on the interests of the United States, clearly and starkly understood, with a focus on delegitimizing Vladimir Putin as the leader of Russia.

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