

Ukraine: The Focus Shifts

by GWYNNE DYER

Moscow is not blaming the latest Ukrainian attack on careless Russian smokers, as it previously tried to do with suspicious explosions on airbases in Russian-occupied Crimea and on a Russian warship in the Black Sea. The blast that brought down sections of the Kerch Bridge connecting Russia and Crimea was far too big and well placed for that.

It was 'a masterpiece of clandestine sabotage,' a former senior British army explosives expert told the BBC. 'With structural demolition, you always plan a 'collapse mechanism' which lets the weight of the structure do the majority of the work.' Not one but two sections of the road bridge ended up in the water.

But planning the explosion on the road bridge so precisely that it also set alight a train of oil tankers on the adjacent rail bridge and closed that too is almost miraculous. Exact timing and coded radio signals may suffice to explain it, but one cannot exclude the possibility of a suicide element in the attack.

The rail bridge and two lanes of the road bridge are already open again, but the psychological effect of this unexpected Ukrainian success will strengthen the fear in Moscow and the growing conviction in Kyiv that Ukraine is on an unstoppable roll. The wholesale collapse of the Russian army now seems quite possible to both parties.

This belief may or may not be correct, and on the Russian side it will inevitably evoke more loose talk about resorting to 'tactical' nuclear weapons. Behind the bluster, however, most of the people who matter in Russia will be considering their options if Vladimir Putin loses power. The real focus of the crisis is moving to Moscow.

Putin still refuses to accept that his war in Ukraine is lost. His 'partial' mobilisation of somewhere between 300,000 and a million reservists (the exact number is the one secret clause in the mobilisation decree) may be his last throw of the dice, but it shows his personal belief that the war could somehow still end in a Russian military victory.

However, most other powerful players in the political elite, the so-called 'siloviki' (literally 'people of force?'), have already concluded that a Russian military victory in Ukraine is highly unlikely and getting more so by the day. The best evidence for that is the recent behaviour of two of Putin's strongest supporters, Ramzan Kadyrov and Yevgeny Prigozhin.

Kadyrov, the Chechen strongman, put his private army at Putin's disposal early in the war. Most of his troops are now in eastern Ukraine, still in their own units. But Kadyrov says that no Chechens will obey the new military call-up, and his units in Ukraine (which are much closer to Moscow than to Chechnya) have largely withdrawn from the fighting.

Prigozhin is now recruiting volunteers from Russian prisons for his 'Wagner' mercenary army. They will no doubt serve as cannon fodder in the 'meat-grinder' war in Ukraine: he needs to keep the cash flow up. But his more experienced and reliable troops have also largely stopped fighting, as if he were saving them for something more important.

This doesn't mean that there is going to be a civil war in Russia, or even a coup that overthrows Putin. However, all the interest groups (including the armed forces) that have orbited around Putin for the past twenty years have realised that change may be coming to Moscow. They are adjusting their positions to profit from the change, or at least ride it out.

It doesn't even mean that Putin is doomed. If he could abandon his weird historical obsessions and recognise that the war in Ukraine has become unwinnable, he might still be able to repair the complex web of favours and unspoken threats that has kept him in power for so long.

It does mean, however, that the focus of the political struggle for Russia's future has moved from Ukraine (which never made any

sense) to Moscow. What matters from now on is not who controls Kherson but who controls the Kremlin.

Everybody knows that in politics, perception is reality. Fewer understand that in modern 'wars of choice' like the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where none of Russia's vital national interests are at stake, perception also trumps reality.

In theory, Russia still has some cards to play ' or at least it would have if political support for the enterprise could be sustained. Russians still outnumber Ukrainians more than three-to-one, and their GDP is eight times bigger. God is always on the side of the bigger battalions.

What makes the war 'unwinnable' in Russian eyes (and most other peoples' as well) is the perception created by a series of spectacular Ukrainian victories. That is what drives the growing power struggle in Moscow, and reduces Russian interest in Ukraine to a level where an outcome satisfactory for Ukraine is now imaginable.