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Subcommittee on Europe, Energy, the Environment and Cyber

Russia's Waning Global Influence

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Chair Keating, Ranking Member Fitzpatrick, members of the Subcommittee, it is an honor to appear before you today to discuss changes in Russia's military, economy, and energy sectors following its war in Ukraine, how the U.S. has imposed costs on Russia for the invasion, and how the U.S. should address Russia's diminished global standing following the invasion. This morning I will discuss specifically Russia's failures on the battlefield in Ukraine and the affect this has had on their global military influence.

Introduction: Ever since Russian President Putin began his military reform effort after the poor showing of his army in the 2008 invasion of Georgia, expectations in the West were that the Russian Army had likely fixed some of its problems including command and control, secure communications, and obsolete military equipment. These expectations made the impact of Russia's failure on the battlefield in Ukraine quite stunning.

President Putin invested revenues from Russia's highly profitable energy exports into modernizing the Russian military across the board. Russian propaganda videos began to feature annual large-scale exercises showing off improved armor and aircraft; new strategic nuclear missiles, submarines, hypersonic missiles, cruise missiles, and the T-14 Armata next generation main battle tank were showcased as examples of the new Russian military. Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014 followed by their intervention in the Syrian Civil War in 2015 signaled that not only did Russia have new equipment, such as Kaliber cruise missiles, but they would deploy them outside Russia too.

This was the Russian military force that the West saw moving towards Ukraine over the months leading to the February invasion; train car after train car from all over Russia loaded with every manner of armored vehicles, rocket systems, ammunition, artillery, and other military equipment that (on a smaller scale) was reminiscent of the Red Army of the Cold War. On the eve of the invasion, the image the Russian military presented to the world was one of a massive war machine. Most experts, including those in the intelligence community, predicted the Ukraine Government of President Zelensky would fall within weeks, especially given the appearance that the Ukraine military was not equipped to defeat such a force. Videos showing civilians in Kiev making Molotov cocktails and drilling in public parks without weapons did not inspire confidence that the Russian forces could be stopped.

Russian failures on the battlefield: This image of the new Russian military was devastated in the days that followed, much to the surprise of many in the West. The poor performance by Russian troops was caused by a multitude of weaknesses and mistakes that only cascaded as the war went on. But the roots of this poor performance can be found in reform efforts that were incomplete, riddled with corruption and poor industrial performance. Russian military leadership did not track the performance of many of the reform projects, believing their own propaganda that the military was improving year by year. In some areas there were improvements; in other areas improvements were very shallow.

But when the new Russian Army was ready to move into Ukraine on the 24th, their offensive was already doomed by poor military planning based on core assumptions that proved to be untrue. Russian leadership, military and civilian, assumed that:

- The Zelensky Government and the Ukraine military would quickly collapse as Russian forces entered the country and would be greeted as liberators; therefore, a short, sharp war was planned in Moscow, resulting in troop numbers and logistics support that could not sustain the long and intense fight ahead, including seizing and holding the vast amounts of territory.
- The Kremlin assumed wrongly that the US under President Biden would react like the Obama Administration in 2014, with rhetorical condemnation and sanctions, but ultimately not provide Ukraine much in terms of lethal assistance. Having survived US and European sanctions from his first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Putin had prepared his economy and financial system to absorb any additional sanctions that could result from his second invasion. Putin also assumed he could deter US assistance by rattling a nuclear saber and warning that US involvement would lead to war. Additionally, the US would be too self-absorbed in its domestic political situation (also stoked by Russia) and focused on China and so would be too distracted to lead the West against Russia.
- The Kremlin also assumed that the European nations, the EU and NATO would not come to the aid of Ukraine beyond giving verbal support and levying sanctions on Russia. European nations were dependent on Russia for energy, giving Putin powerful leverage over how much assistance he would allow Europe to provide before he cut the gas. Without US leadership, the assumption was that neither Europe nor NATO would not hold together, intimidated by threats of a new war in Europe.
- CIA Director William Burns said about Putin, "He was confident that he had modernized his military and they were capable of a quick decisive victory at minimal cost. Those assumptions have proven to be profoundly flawed." Because of those flawed assumptions and the incomplete modernization effort, the Russian invasion force was not ready to fight a Ukraine Army that was actually filled with soldiers fighting to defend their homes and families, armed with some of the most advanced weaponry in the arsenals of the West and led by a Ukraine President who transformed from a comic actor to a wartime president...none of which was foreseen by the Kremlin.

Russian failures on the battlefield also come from other flaws in the Russian military:

Military Leadership failures: Russian military leadership proved slow to adapt to changes in the battlefield brought about by US and European assistance; they were also slow to learn from their mistakes. Much of this is caused by the indolence and hubris characteristic of the Russian senior ranks that found mistakes hard to accept.

Strategic failures

- Russia was unable to achieve air superiority over Ukraine, in part due to fear of high casualty rates from Ukrainian air defense, which continued to improve with Western assistance as the war went on. This kept the Russian Air Force from leaving Russian airspace, where they launched stand-off weapons.
- Except for a few incidents early in the war, Russian offensive cyber and electronic warfare capability never became more than a nuisance to Ukraine, primarily due to Ukraine cyber defense supplemented by assistance from both the private and public sector in the West.
- Russian intelligence capability, both on the battlefield and strategically, was flawed; many of the wrong assumptions underlying Russian military planning can be blamed on poor intel assessments. On the battlefield, there was only a weak link between actionable battlefield intelligence and Russian forces able to capitalize on the intelligence.
- The Kremlin did not prepare the Russian people for a long, grinding struggle, downplaying the impact the war would have on Russian everyday life and justifying the intervention as an attempt to de-nazify Ukraine, a justification that was not convincing to many Russians. This failure made it difficult to mobilize Russian youth into a war which was not well understood and accepted by many Russian parents, leading thousands of young men to flee Russia to escape the mobilization. The Russian people have not been prepared to actually fight a war with Ukraine.
- In the beginning of the invasion, command and control was a patchwork affair among a number of senior military leaders each commanding a certain part of the operation; there was no overall commander in charge to integrate and better coordinate the various elements of the operation (air and land power along with long-range fires) until late in the war.

Tactical failures

- After months of fighting reduced the numbers of more experienced Russian troops, replacements even before the mobilization were poorly trained, equipped and led at the tactical level, causing errors on which Ukraine was able to capitalize, such as the bridging incident in Bilohorivka in May where Russia lost almost 1,000 soldiers and nearly 100 pieces of equipment while trying to cross the Siverskyi Donets River. The rigid centralized Russian command culture causes individual Russian soldiers to generally lack initiative or innovate in response to changes on the battlefield. Use of artillery to batter the opposition as was used in World War I rather than more maneuver warfare was evidence of this lack of innovation at senior levels. An absence of operational security concerning cell phone use early in the campaign caused senior leadership to be tracked, targeted and killed.
- Logistics negligence has been at the core of Russian failures, including equipment failure from poor maintenance, shortage of precision-guided munitions, lack of dependable secure communications, even modern weapons for mobilized troops. Ukraine's use of

HIMARS to destroy logistical hubs has worsened battlefield logistics and caused shortages for Russian frontline troops. Sanctions on critical parts such as semiconductors have also severely impacted Russian industrial capability to build new modern weapons and ammunition to replace those used on the battlefield.

- With recent reversals on the battlefield, the morale of Russian soldiers has reach new lows, causing a breakdown in discipline that has turned Russian retreats into routs leaving behind equipment as well as carrying out atrocities on civilian populations.

Nuclear weapons: The use of low yield tactical nuclear weapons has been a part of Russian military doctrine for many years as part of the “escalate to de-escalate” strategy. Use of nuclear weapons is specifically justified by doctrine if the survival of Russia itself is at stake. At the outset of the February invasion of Ukraine and at various times since then, Putin has alluded to his willingness to include nuclear weapons as a part of his invasion plans. At various times he has also walked back his veiled threat saying nuclear weapons are not needed. At a minimum he has broken the taboo about threatening the use of nuclear weapons to intimidate not just Ukraine but the West, hoping to deter active involvement of the West in Ukraine’s defense. This deterrent has partially worked, as the US and Europe are careful not to supply weaponry to Ukraine that could be seen by the Kremlin as escalatory (such as modern fighter aircraft or long range missiles Ukraine can use to hit targets in Russia). President Biden took deploying US troops to Ukraine off the table early on for the same reason, to avoid escalation. Most experts agree that the probability of President Putin ordering the use of a nuclear weapon either on the battlefield or in a “demonstration shot” is low and there are no signs of nuclear weapons being readied. However, it would be of great benefit for the Russian war effort if Putin is successful in using nuclear weapons to deter or reduce Western assistance to Ukraine. Should a low-yield nuclear weapon be ordered for use by President Putin, it will likely not be used to effect change on the battlefield as much as Putin responding to pressure coming from his inner circle that he show toughness and determination to use all means necessary to win in Ukraine.

Effect of Russian failures on Russian global military influence: Russian global military influence has certainly suffered due to these failures. The high expectations for Russian military performance were dashed in a spectacular way, the sheer scale of the failure in almost all areas of the military art leaves global experts and governments scratching their heads. Certainly, the impact of these failures could lead some decisionmakers to consider reducing their defense spending, no longer concerned about Russian military strength. Perhaps would be allies could see the prospects of forming a military partnership with Russia as not worth the effort, given their lackluster performance. Other actors may no longer be deterred by the threat of Russian military response should they take actions contrary to the wishes of Moscow.

All of those responses would be a mistake. Despite the very public failures seen on the battlefield in Ukraine, Russian history suggests that they are capable of overcoming their shortfalls and again rising to become a major military challenge. Just the Russian nuclear capability, along with modern submarines and ballistic missiles make them a formidable nuclear threat to the US and other nations. The might of a rebuilt Russian Army, well-trained, equipped and led is not unimaginable, as Nazi Germany saw in 1945. Finally, their regional strength remains potent, as does their ability to carry out conflict in the “grey zone” just below the threshold of war where cyber-attack, disinformation campaigns and other examples of hybrid

war can be used to intimidate and bully neighbors. But perhaps the impact that is most keenly felt is the brutality of the Russian Army; the atrocities waged against civilians perpetrated by their hands found in village after village previously occupied by Russian troops. That brutal image of the Russian soldier may make the deepest and most lasting impact on their global military influence of the war.

As Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Michael Kofman wrote in this month's Foreign Affairs, "Even with its capacity and global standing diminished by its war in Ukraine, Russia will continue to be driven by its resentments, a quest for a geopolitical space outside its borders, and a desire for status. Washington cannot afford to write Russia off in an effort to ease its own mind, nor should it imagine that Europe can manage the problem on its own. The threat may evolve, but it will persist." While Russia's global military influence has been impacted by its failures on the battlefield in Ukraine, it would be shortsighted and dangerous to assume the Russian military, and the Russian political ambitions it supports, will therefore fade away from the world stage. That is not Russia's history.