

RUSSIA'S GLOBAL DOWNSIZING

<https://www.2thepointnews.com/russias-global-downsizing/>

The tide of the Ukraine war has

subtly shifted as the Russian offensive has exhausted itself and the Ukrainian pushback has started to gain momentum.

In retrospect, the pitched battle for Sievierodonetsk and Lysychansk in late June and early July 2022 could perhaps be recognized as the high-water mark for Russia's violent intervention aimed at exterminating Ukraine as an independent state.

Moscow had to concentrate its best fighting forces and the bulk of its big guns in order to capture the last bit of Luhansk region, and re-directing these depleted capabilities toward a new attack in Donetsk region has proven to be too ambitious thus far.

Artillery barrages are hitting Bakhmut and Kramatorsk regularly and indiscriminately, but even the deployment of Wagner mercenaries cannot adequately compensate for the shortage of ground troops (Realist, July 26).

The battle for Donbas, which became the central theater of the war after the battle for Kyiv was lost by overstretched Russian forces in early April, is deadlocked, and the new focal point is now Kherson.

This regional capital was captured by a column of Russian battalion tactical groups (BTGs) advancing from Crimea in the first week of the war, but attempts to keep the offensive going toward Mykolaiv failed and turned into a partial retreat (Meduza, July 29).

The grouping of Russian forces to the west of the Dnieper River is vulnerable because the long supply lines from Crimea go through two bridges and a dam, which have been targeted by Ukraine's new long-range strike weapons systems, including the US-supplied HIMARS (The Insider, July 28).

It would have been strategically reasonable to withdraw these exposed troops and present the move as a measure of “goodwill,” as was the case with the recent escape from Snake Island, but the Kremlin’s political desire to keep a bridgehead for a hypothetical attack on Odesa has prevailed (Svoboda.org, July 29).

This stubbornness grants Ukraine an opportunity to score an important victory, which could destroy Russian discourse that the “special military operation” proceeds according to plan (Nezavisimaya gazeta, July 25).

Instead of bragging about the “liberation” of historical Russian lands, Moscow now finds itself on the defensive against a determined adversary supported by a re-energized North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and unable to respond to the progressive tightening of the European Union’s sanctions regime (RussianCouncil.ru, July 29).

The plan of last resort is to completely stop gas exports to Europe, which is certain to produce serious economic disruptions and human suffering (Forbes.ru, July 29).

Yet, such an energy attack is certain to backfire severely, as Russia’s own gas industry will have to reduce production in the winter and many elements of infrastructure will be damaged beyond repair (The Bell, July 25).

Moscow tends to overestimate the discord among EU member states, but Hungary’s dissenting voice cannot undermine the renewed solidarity of the bloc, underpinned by the resolve shown by Germany, which is beginning to overcome the inhibitions of its traditional policy of engagement with Russia (Nezavisimaya gazeta, July 27).

Angrily severing multiple ties with Europe, Russia cannot gain the desired position of leadership in the presumed anti-Western and anti-globalist camp because most states of the Global South see Moscow’s brutal resolve to military force as a blunder (Rosbalt, July 28).

The Kremlin has tried to show its understanding of concerns about food security by accepting the Turkey-backed initiative on facilitating the export of Ukrainian grain by sea, but the missile strikes on Odesa prove the true fragility of this compromise (Kommersant, July 29).

The Russian government keeps looking for allies in Africa (where Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov traveled last week) and Latin America, but its pretenses for sharing anti-imperialist aspirations have been exposed as false by the patently imperialist nature of Russia’s attack on Ukraine (Novayagazeta.eu, July 26).

The Russian vision of breaking the US-designed world order by boldly confronting the collective West in Ukraine has been compromised by the ambivalent character of its much-advertised strategic partnership with China (The Insider, July 12).

On the one hand, Moscow is wary of its growing dependency on uncertain support from Beijing. On the other, the Kremlin is hopeful for an escalation of conflict between China and the United States centered on Taiwan, expecting to find its difficult neighbor, if such a situation occurs, more interested in upgrading the security aspects of the Russian-Chinese partnership (Izvestiya, July 29).

China, however, prefers to manage this conflict on its own terms and frowns on every Russian move made toward expanding ties with India or Vietnam (Ru.valdaiclub.com, July 22).

Beijing monitors carefully the course of combat operations in Ukraine, but it is particularly focused on the health of the Russian economy, about which official data is becoming increasingly harder to find (Kommersant, July 28).

The government led by Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin (who prefers to eschew the official war discourse) has managed to stabilize Russia's financial system, at least temporarily, but can do little to rehabilitate industries affected by the cuts of supply chains and stoppage of high-tech imports (Meduza, July 21).

The military-industrial complex is portrayed as the main driver of growth, but even official reporting, which keeps promising wonders in "import substitution," admits the acceleration of macroeconomic contraction (Nezavisimaya gazeta, July 28).

Every replacement of Western technological components crucial in the production of modern arms systems by a domestic "solution" involves a step back in quality and reliability. Thus, industrial degradation has become the result of following political orders to keep production going and unemployment in check (The Insider, July 14).

Russian President Vladimir Putin may have only a superficial impression about the real situation in the economy and the actual posture of the armed forces, but he certainly has unshakable convictions about Russia's pivotal role in global affairs—and his own role in making history.

He cannot afford any doubt in the self-serving prediction of the hostile West's rapid decline and remains blind to the consolidation of Western unity in the face of Russia's aggression.

But Ukraine's defiance in resisting Putin's brutal attack is deforming his big picture. Russia's military might is supposed to be unmatched, but the battle for Kherson is set to expose Russian forces' obsolescence, ineptness, corruption and severe manpower shortages more starkly than ever.

The recent naval parade in St. Petersburg provided perhaps a moment of joy for the anxious commander-in-chief, but Putin's delusions of grandeur are punctured by every encounter with reality, even those orchestrated extra carefully by his minions.

The Russian state ship is slowly sinking on the rocks of the Ukraine war. And China is not coming to the rescue anytime soon.

Dr. Pavel K. Baev is a senior researcher at the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo, Norway.

Copyright ©2024 **2 The Point News** unless otherwise noted.