

Divide and conquer: The Kremlin's gambit

March 2023

Petrov's Defence, known popularly as the Russian Game, is a chess opening based around symmetry: the second player matching the moves of the first through pawn, knight and so on, in a game that has a reputation for leading to protracted, difficult draws unless a player can seize upon a momentary advantage that may come but once per match. How Vladimir Putin might long for a Petrov's Defence on the chessboard of Ukraine at the



present moment, although admitting that a 'draw' (whatever that means in military and political terms) is the best he can hope for would be anathema to the man who has long viewed himself as the grandmaster of the Russian Game that really matters – that is, utter dominance. But as the clock ticks past the one-year anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine, and victory looking more remote a prospect than ever, Putin might not want to focus on his opponent across the board, but those by his side.

An even bigger problem for the Kremlin than the global loss of face, withdrawal of virtually every key industry and company from the Russian market and the rapidly worsening quality of life for ordinary Russians is the increasing divisions among the political, economic and military elite that pose a far more existential threat to the conception of 'modern Russia' than a territorial dispute or Western pull-out could. In the rough quarter-century since Putin took power, his grip has been unquestioned due to a combination of carrots and sticks: allowing the oligarchs to keep their fortunes so long as they caused no trouble and enriching the elite through business contracts and political connections for the former, and enacting a cocktail of repression, manipulation and assassination against any individual (or group), perceived to be the 'enemy' for the latter. Everyone – or at least everyone that mattered – has been on the same page and whether through fervour or fear, was immaterial.

Now, though, as not only the Russian military but the very concept of Russian exceptionalism is humiliated on a daily basis, schisms are emerging and splits are deepening as to the future of Putin, the future of the war, and the future of Russia. It is important to state that these are not necessarily pro-war or anti-war camps, rather pro- or anti- the way the war has been prosecuted, and Putin's handling of it.

Three main groups have emerged. First is the camp of Putin himself, the strongest Russian leader since Stalin and the one whose stated goal is a return to the glory and influence of the Soviet Union without the inbuilt fault lines that ultimately led to that body's collapse. In the early days of the invasion, Putin took pains to identify himself personally with the mission to (as he saw it) restore to Russia what was naturally hers, making the presumed success a central plank of his ultimate legacy – but risking associating himself indelibly with a failure, which has so far transpired. Not only does Putin genuinely believe that the war in Ukraine is a necessary first step for the good of his country, it is also an article of faith for his personal survival: the man who (according to propaganda) can never fail, the only man who can restore Russia to her former glory – the new Russian tsar.

He has already fired several military and intelligence commanders for failing to live up to expectations and has at times appeared in open warfare with Sergei Shoigu, the Minister of Defence – and a potential pretender to the throne. Putin's camp is still the biggest, due to the two long-standing pillars of absolute loyalty or absolute fear, but the fact that a potential forced departure is even being *thought* about in the previously reality-proof Kremlin by a military bristling at the losses they are incurring, an intelligence community bristling at taking the blame, and politicians angling to save their own prospects, is indicative of the struggle he now faces.

The second group is the oligarchs, both within Russia and without – largely a group for whom politics plays second fiddle to economic concerns. They look with distaste at how the war, and subsequent sanctions, have not only trashed the domestic Russian economy, but extended suspicion of (and disinclination to do business with) Russians worldwide, in addition to increasing due diligence and KYC measures more generally in an attempt to head off deepening efforts of the Russian elite to move and conceal their assets worldwide.

The war, and Putin's continued presence in the Kremlin, is actively harming their interests and the consensus among this moneyed elite who would like nothing more than for Russia to fully embrace the capitalism that the war has forced it to renounce, is that peace should be sought, the Russian line of control either maintained along the Donbass or even pulling back to pre-war borders entirely. When your tribe is governed by their bank balances and not their passports, you do not care who is calling the shots so long as you are in cover; Putin has ceased to be useful to the oligarchy in this regard and so he is haemorrhaging their support. While their influence in domestic politics may be limited, when it comes to getting what you want, it should be remembered that money always talks.

The third cohort is centred on the Wagner Group, the private military firm founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, known previously for propping up dictators across Africa and Syria.

Wagner has taken an increasingly central role in the war, as much out of desperation (the need for more numbers) as politics (it will play better back home if the frontline troops are prisoners recruited into Wagner rather than the flowers of Russian manhood). Prigozhin has long been a close friend of Putin, with all the benefits of finance and influence which that implies, but given Wagner's geographic spread, its clientele, and the network built up to supply munitions and move monies through unsanctioned proxies and shells, he has amassed global power and ability that transcends even the majority of the Russian elite.

Moreover, behind-the-scenes, Wagner has been verbally castigating the Red Army and the Ministry of Defence because Prigozhin knows he is untouchable. Having a private army will do that to you. Indeed, the word from certain quarters in Moscow is that Prigozhin fancies a run at the top job when it becomes available – or even, perhaps, looking to ensure that it does. This could not even be considered an external coup, compared to an internal defenestration by the GRU or Red Army, given Prigozhin and Wagner's centrality to the war effort and Russian ambition. Capitalising on the perceived failings of state intelligence agencies and the military while being responsible for neither, counselling greater aggression at a time when minds are starting to turn to conciliation, and being indispensable to Putin while simultaneously trashing the entire rest of his support base – Prigozhin may be looking to take the 'divide and conquer' tactic to its ultimate expression.

Propaganda wars are thus raging between the FSB, GRU, Wagner Group et al in the corridors of power, and while the 'party line' of unity may be holding out in public, in private all cohesion has crumbled as the idea takes root, perhaps for the first genuine time, that Putin has to go. Intelligence agencies, the financial/private sectors and the military alike must all make the call on whether their interests (which may or may not align with Russia's) are better served with him or without him. Men like Shoigu and Prigozhin, or even Yuri Kovalchuk, may have designs on being the next strongman, while the oligarchy, polity and military could all conceivably be the power-brokers to decide the next twenty years. And while Putin's position at the top has looked unshakeable for decades, due to ensuring that the political and military elite owe their positions, good fortune and (perhaps) survival to him alone, all players of the Russian Game are aware that when it comes to seizing victory for oneself, you only get one chance.

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