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Welcome to Issue 9 of *The Listening Post*, the CDR's monthly digest of authoritative scholarship, debates and podcasts published over the course of the month on global, regional and Australian defence and strategic issues. *The Listening Post* provides an easy access repository of articles, commentary and analysis on major defence and strategic policy issues. It examines some of the most prominent problems and debates for senior ADF personnel and Defence civilians working on issues related to Australian strategic policy.

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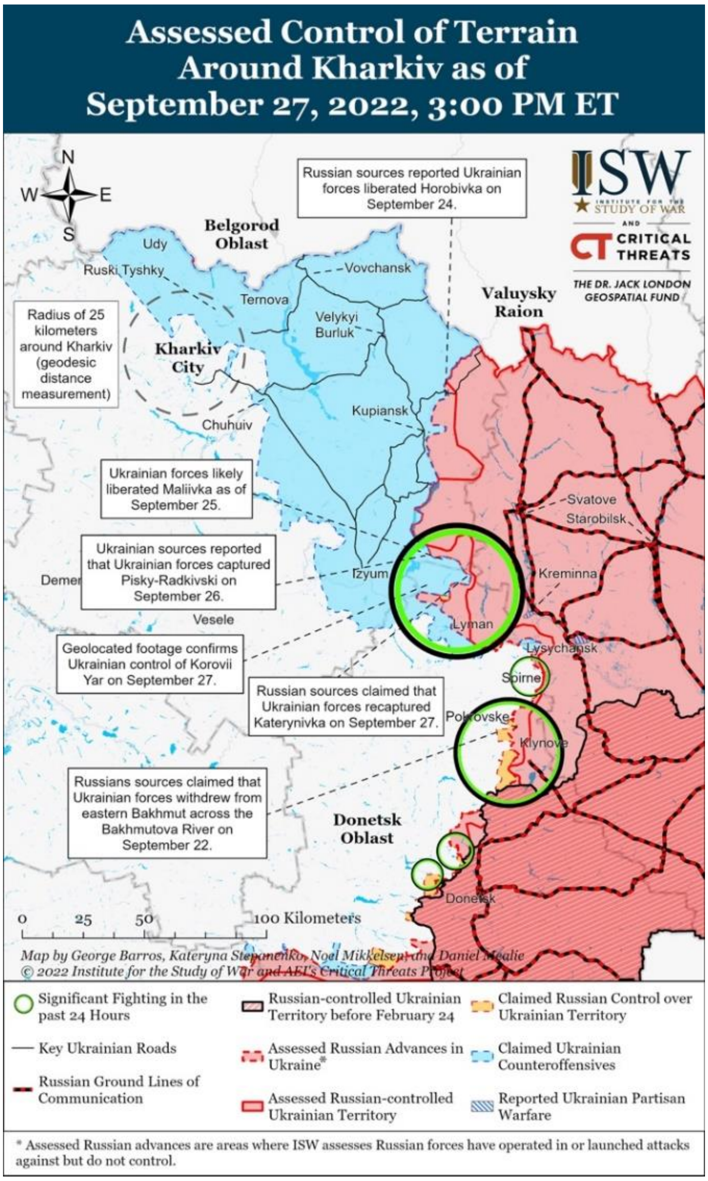
Implications of Ukraine's Counteroffensive

September's Ukrainian counteroffensive against Russian forces in Donetsk and Luhansk clearly took Moscow by surprise. Long telegraphed as a strike from the south-east, around the city of Kherson, the Ukrainian armed forces instead launched their main effort from the north-east near Kharkov. With the Russian military redeploying to the Kherson region in order to block the anticipated assault, the Ukrainian counteroffensive encountered weakly defended positions made up of reservists and local Donetsk militia. Over around five days, Ukrainian forces broke through Russian lines, liberated over 5,000 square kilometres of territory, and sent Russian forces into a hasty retreat (which was, naturally, described on Russian state media as 'regrouping'). The progress of that offensive has predictably slowed as Ukrainian forces look to secure important transit nodes, such as the city of Izyum, but continue to press their advantage, particularly in Donetsk oblast.

In Ukraine's south-east a supporting effort has been launched by Kyiv's forces, albeit against more heavily fortified and defended Russian positions. The front's centre of gravity has shifted towards the town of Lyman, as Ukrainian forces attempt to pocket a large Russian force there. The prospect of liberating the recently lost city of Lysychansk would be a significant blow to the Russian resupply effort, both in the north as well as the south.

Figure 1: Ukrainian gains around Kharkiv



Source: Map by George Barros, Kateryn Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, and Will Kielm, 'Russian Campaign Assessment, October 3', *Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project*, 3 October 2022, 9.00 pm ET. https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-3

However, a comprehensive Ukrainian victory on its eastern flank remains far from assured. Much will depend on how rapidly the Ukrainian military can translate its advantages into territorial gain before the arrival of significant numbers of Russian conscripts to reinforce its positions. And while there should be no illusions about the offensive capabilities of these new units – the members of which will receive little to no training and be poorly equipped – the Russian strategy is clearly to backfill its lines with a blocking force over the European winter, giving its more seasoned troops the chance to rest and resupply.

There is also a broader geopolitical dimension to Moscow's strategy: being able to drag the war back to a long and grinding campaign of attrition will not only gradually bleed Ukrainian forces but also buy time for Russia's energy blockades against the EU to take effect. The imposition of these energy costs against previously heavily dependent nations like Germany – which the recent sabotage of the Nordstream 1 and half of the Nordstream 2 pipelines now formalises – will certainly be a test of NATO unity and patience. This also speaks to continuity rather than change on the part of the Kremlin. It is evident from Vladimir Putin's escalatory actions, especially around the targeting of energy supplies, that he continues to have faith in an eventual fracturing of Western support for Ukraine.

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Russia's 'partial mobilisation' and efforts to annexe parts of Ukraine

Moscow's response to Ukraine's battlefield successes has been threefold. First, it has announced the drafting of some 300,000 additional conscripts (and some believe the figure will go as high as one million personnel). While the Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu has stressed that this will be comprised of individuals with former military experience, reports from Russia clearly show the process to be a much more haphazard one. On numerous occasions anti-war protestors have been arrested and then immediately drafted into the military at police stations. Elderly and infirm Russians have similarly received call-up papers. And those in Russia's regions, populated more heavily by ethnic minorities, have remained disproportionate targets of the mobilisation effort, which has deliberately avoided mass drafting campaigns in the politically more dangerous centres of power in Moscow and St Petersburg. In response to the partial mobilisation, it is estimated that at least 260,000 draft-eligible Russian males have fled the country for Georgia, Kazakhstan, Finland, and the two destinations which do not require Russian passports or visas: Yerevan in Armenia and Istanbul in Turkey.

A second Russian response to its downgraded battlefield fortunes was to announce referendums on the question of joining Russia in four areas of Ukraine's east: Donetsk and Luhansk oblast, as well as Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. Given that Russian forces are not even in full control of these regions, and many are in the middle of the fighting, it is clear that there has been even less pretence around the democratic process than usual by the Kremlin. This is borne out by the 'results', which include alleged votes in favour of annexation running at between 87% and 99%, and turnouts of over 75%. While many would question the utility of such exercises, holding these sham referenda gives Moscow both a quasi-legal basis to claim that the Ukrainian military is involved in direct attacks against Russian territory; and the capacity to deem partisan attacks against Russian-installed public servants as acts of terrorism, with few constraints on its response.

Russia's desire to formally annex some 15% of Ukraine's territory also potentially provides it with the ability to argue that it would be justified in retaliating against attacks with tactical nuclear weapons. Hardline Russian lawmakers have been demanding such a response, and it has been openly floated as an option by state media for some time. In announcing the sham referenda, Putin also referred to Russia's determination to use all the tools at its disposal to defend its territory and obliquely noted that the wind blows West from parts of Ukraine.

Western responses to these threats have generally been to consider them as posturing. Certainly Putin's claim, 'I am not bluffing', hardly inspires confidence about the strength of his convictions. Moreover, aside from demonstration effects the use of tactical nuclear weapons in the Ukraine operating environment would have very limited battlefield utility. Most Russian units are ill-equipped for nuclear, biological and/or chemical (NBC) environments; the Kremlin would need to envisage the use of a number of nonstrategic nuclear weapons to fracture Ukrainian defences. And, whereas it is possible that Putin may come to view nuclear escalation as the 'least-worst' option available to him, it is likely that such a calculation would also take his domestic political fortunes into heavy consideration.

On the topic of Putin's leadership, it is clear that he has been weakened by recent events. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization he was forced to publicly acknowledge China's 'questions and concerns' about the war in Ukraine, and received a public chiding by Narendra Modi. He was also made to wait for the arrival of Central Asian leaders prior to bilateral meetings (a tactic Putin has previously employed against Western leaders). Beijing also came out strongly in support of Kazakhstan's sovereignty: a clear warning to Putin that China will not tolerate Russian adventurism in its own strategic space, and a veiled challenge to Russian regional primacy in Central Asia. Putin has been further weakened by an upsurge in violence in the disputed region of Nagorno Karabakh. Azerbaijan (backed by Turkey) seized the opportunity afforded by a drawn-down Russian military presence to attack Armenian positions. The response by the Armenian government was to call on Moscow for intervention by the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a request that the Kremlin denied.

Alongside what might be signs of fragmentation on Russia's periphery are indications that Putin's domestic control is not as robust as it has been. There have been large and growing protests against mobilisation in Dagestan and Russia's far east. And while these are presently not significant threats to Putin's rule, should the future hold further military defeats as well as unpopular domestic moves to try and shore up Russia's position, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that Putin's power will come under serious challenge.

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) leaders' summit

The leaders of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) gathered in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, from 15 to 16 September, in person for the first time since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The group – comprising eight full members (China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), four observer states (Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran and Mongolia) and six 'dialogue partners' (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey) – constitutes one of the world's largest regional organisations encompassing around 40% of the world's population, approximately a 33% of global GDP and 66% of the Eurasian landmass.

The organisation has tended to be written off since its establishment in June 2001 as either an unwieldy 'talk shop' or hyped as an nascent illiberal 'Asian NATO'. Originally growing out of Chinese and Russian led efforts in the early 1990s to resolve Soviet-era border disputes in Central Asia as the so-called 'Shanghai Five' of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the organisation took its current form just months prior to 9/11. Indeed, the foundational concern for the SCO when it was inaugurated was to combat the challenges of what China dubbed the 'three evils' of 'terrorism, extremism and separatism'. However, since then the development of coordination of member state cooperation including regular 'anti-terror' exercises by SCO militaries, intelligence sharing, and closer police and law enforcement cooperation has become 'core business' for the group.

In the intervening years the groups' focus has grown to include regional economic concerns as well as a broader geopolitical and strategic bent that reflects Moscow and Beijing's longstanding desire to see 'multipolarity' and a dilution of American 'hegemony' in international politics. For the post-Soviet Central Asian states, the SCO has offered a mechanism through which Russia's often overbearing diplomatic and strategic influence has been diluted by China's increasing economic and strategic influence, permitting many of the post-Soviet Central Asian states to engage in 'multi-vector' diplomacy that generates benefits from both Moscow and Beijing.

In practical terms the organisation has yet to come to grips with significant coordination problems arising from its expansion, the inability to generate a consensus on thorny security issues, such as the future of Afghanistan, or overcome baked-in security dilemmas between members, observers and dialogue partners (for example India and Pakistan or Azerbaijan and Armenia). This was reflected in the issues discussed at the summit, including the security situation in Afghanistan and what if anything the SCO will do about it, regional trade and investment, and energy connectivity. As if to underscore the organisation's inability or unwillingness to grapple effectively with such issues, a border war erupted between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as the summit met.

The expansion of the SCO beyond the original membership nonetheless demonstrates something of its wider appeal. For many of the SCO's new members and observer states, as seasoned Central Asia observer Raffaello Pantucci notes:

> There is a pleasing visual utility to being present at a colloquium of such stature, representing at least a third of the world's population and with no Westerners present. They can all show that notwithstanding the sanctions or sanctimony thrown at them by the West, they have allies of substance who welcome them with open arms.

In the context of a world beset by increasing geopolitical and geoeconomic competition this alone makes the SCO something for Western policymakers to take seriously.

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AUKUS Anniversary

Since the announcement on 15 September 2021 of the Australia–UK–US (AUKUS) agreement for cooperation on Australian acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines (SSN) – as well as closer cooperation between the three allies on artificial intelligence, cyber, quantum, underwater systems, and long-range strike capabilities – an enormous amount of commentary has been generated as to the agreement's implications for Australian strategic and defence policy, its relations with allies (the US and Britain) and friends (France), and the broader regional strategic environment.

Some were eager to claim that AUKUS would deliver all manner of strategic and security blessings onto Australia. One commentator breathlessly proclaimed that AUKUS was a 'new triple near-alliance' based on 'capability, convergent interest and, above all, trust' that would deliver a 'merger' of US, UK and Australian 'military, industrial and scientific capabilities'. Of course, AUKUS, is not an alliance by any accepted definition of that term but rather an agreement to build on existing alliance ties and cooperation on a range of military, strategic and technological issues.

The most notable of these has concerned US and UK commitment to assist Australia in the acquisition of a fleet of SSNs. On this score, as one of us noted at the time, there remained significant unanswered questions about what this would mean for Australia's already strained submarine capability, Australia's capacity to establish the necessary infrastructure and technical know-how to build and maintain a fleet of SSNs, and whether this acquisition was to be aligned with a coherent strategy for their use.

Progress toward answering some of these questions has been made in the past 12 months. With respect to developing the necessary physical and skills infrastructure to acquire and sustain an SSN capability, the Morrison government announced prior to the federal election commitments to: construct a 'future navy base' at Port Kembla, Newcastle or Brisbane; triple the size of the Osborne Shipyard in Adelaide for future shipbuilding; and a $A1 billion investment in the upgrade of the home port for Australia's submarines at HMAS Stirling in Perth. Subsequently, a bipartisan bill, the 'Australia–U.S. Submarine Officer Pipeline Act', was introduced to the US Congress in June 2022. The bill, if passed, would approve 'two Australian submarine officers' to be selected to receive training at the US Navy Nuclear Propulsion School and 'following completion of such course, be assigned to duty on an operational United States submarine at sea'. In September, new Minister of Defence, Richard Marles, also announced a training agreement with the UK for Australian submariners to undertake 'training aboard HMS Anson', the UK's fifth Astute-class submarine.

The broader and arguably more important question of how the future acquisition of SSN capabilities will factor into Australian strategic and defence policy remains, on the basis of publicly available evidence, an open one. The Lowy Institute's Sam Roggeveen hinted at the core question here recently when he noted that if all eight SSNs envisaged under AUKUS are delivered Australia will not only have 'more than the UK and France now have, or plan to have' but will have acquired a 'global strike capability' by virtue of an SSN's 'almost infinite range and endurance' and their arming with 'missiles that can strike targets thousands of kilometres inland'.

This line of thinking *implies* that a strategy of deterrence by [punishment] will animate Australia's SSN capability. This would constitute a profound shift from the deterrence by [denial] logic that has [underpinned] Australian defence posture since the 1980s. The question here, then, is if the objective remains deterrence by denial, then an Australian SSN fleet makes little sense. However, if the goal is to threaten punishment, then an Australian SSN capability is more logical, although that also assumes that such assets would be fully integrated into US warfighting plans. While an Australian SSN capability that could undertake a deterrence by punishment mission would perform important alliance signalling functions, it further commits Australia to participate in any future scenario involving conflict with the People's Republic of China (PRC) – including over Taiwan.

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Chinese Communist Party's 20th Congress

Finally, there is much speculation afoot amongst China-watchers about the likely outcomes of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 20th Congress to be held on 16 October. Major developments that are anticipated include: (i) the possible bestowal upon Xi Jinping of a new title (leader of the state etc.) and official extension of his tenure as General Secretary of the CCP and President of the PRC; (ii) significant changes to the make-up of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) and Central Military Commission (CMC); and (iii) signals regarding the Party's direction on the 'reformist' legacy of Deng Xiaoping and his successors.

Xi's likely 'coronation' as General Secretary and President of the PRC for a third term has been foreshadowed since the abrogation of term limits and the enshrinement of Xi's theoretical contribution to Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong Thought (i.e. Xi Jinping's 'Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era') into the country's constitution at the Party's 19th Congress in 2017.

Yet [reports] that he will also be bestowed with the title of 'people's leader' (*renmin lingxiu*) at the 20th Congress and/or that he will reactivate the position of Chairman of the Party Central Committee (referred to as Party Chairman), if realised, would represent an entrenchment of Xi's role for the rest of the 2020s. The former would move him one step closer to Chairman Mao Zedong in the pantheon of Chinese communism, while the latter [could] permit Xi to resolve the thorny issue of succession, as through the position of Party Chairman he could 'groom the heir-designate' both under his direct watch and at a pace of his choosing.

Combined with [ongoing] efforts to cement Xi as the political and ideological 'core' of the Party-state, such developments would confirm the [transition] of China from the 'neo-authoritarian oligarchy' established under the 'reform and opening' era of Deng Xiaoping to a 'neo-totalitarian tyranny' with Xi at the helm.

Since his ascent to the position of General Secretary and President, Xi has sought to grasp control of 'the gun, the knife and the pen' – i.e control the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the security services, and the propaganda apparatus. At the outset of Xi's tenure this objective was in part attained by high-profile purges of 'the gun' and 'the knife' of the Party-state as part of the new General Secretary's 'anti-corruption' drive. This most notably resulted in the downfalls of the head of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission, Zhou Yongkang, which oversaw China's security services, and Central Military Commission (CMC) vice-chairman, General Xu Caihou.

With the 20th Congress approaching, Xi has the opportunity to tighten his grip further on 'the gun, the knife and the pen' through overseeing the promotion of allies and proteges to the 25-member Politburo, the CMC and other key Party bodies such as the Central Political and Legal Commission. With respect to the CMC, for instance, two current members, PLA generals Zhang Youxia and Xu Qiliang, are due to retire with two leading candidates to replace them (generals Li Zuocheng and Miao Hua), both considered to have long-standing personal and professional ties to the General Secretary.

As we noted in the May edition of the *Listening Post*, there has also been some speculation that 'reformists' within the top CCP leadership may have been spurred to greater action as a result of the cumulative effects of the return to Mao-like ideological mass campaigns and the personality cult surrounding Xi, and the economic impacts of Xi's 'zero Covid' policies. The evidence for this is sparse. Yet the question of the direction that Xi and the Party will take with respect to the Chinese economy remains an open one. While Xi, as veteran CCP-watcher Willy Wo-Lap Lam notes, might have an 'aversion to market economics' and a predilection for the revival of 'Maoist norms in economic policy-making', he may be forced to tack back toward Dengist pragmatism in the face of economic headwinds driven by the impact of Covid-19 shutdowns and China's real estate bubble. However, the economic policy toolkit that Chinese leaders have utilised in the recent past – such as use of investment in infrastructure as a stimulus tool and tight monetary policy – may not work and 'growth prospects for China under President Xi's new term should be underwhelming and possibly not go above three percent in 2023'.

A final aspect of the 20th Party Congress that could have long-term implications is its role in generational turnover within the top-level of the CCP. As Damian Ma and Joshua Andersen detail at *Macro Polo,* 'based on nomination age ceilings alone, we estimate the upcoming 20th Central Committee (CC) in 2022 will see 63% membership turnover, with the post-60s generation—politicians born after 1960—accounting for at least 80% of total CC membership'. Therefore, the majority of China's emergent leaders will have come of age in the heyday of China's 'reform and opening' period (i.e. the 1980s and 1990s), raising the possibility that their distinctly different experiences of political socialisation, factional affiliation, educational/professional backgrounds, and levels of engagement with the rest of the world compared to Xi's generation may open a window of opportunity for accommodation in the 2030s.

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