

A New Command for the Same War

by George Friedman - October 11, 2022

A few days ago, Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to replace the military commander in charge of the Ukraine war with Gen. Sergei Surovikin, and thus change the military culture of the conflict itself. It was an important move but not necessarily for the reasons offered by most of the media. It came after Ukraine, armed primarily by the United States, had seized the initiative on the Ukrainian battlefield. Putin's credibility was at stake even among ostensibly pro-war elements who were now starting to criticize his performance.

The origin of the criticism is important. One of the loudest critics of Russia's strategy in Ukraine has been Ramzan Kadyrov, Putin's longtime functionary who used extreme brutality at Putin's behest to keep the uprising in Chechnya under control. Kadyrov and Putin were both committed to halting the fragmentation of Russia and recovering what could be recovered. Kadyrov supported the invasion of Ukraine but was appalled at the weakness shown by the Russian army, particularly its high command. From his point of view, a ruthless operation against the Ukrainian public and military was required – in other words, a Chechen-type war. So here we have a stalwart Putin ally publicly lambasting the incompetence and softness of the Russian army, only for a new commander to be named.

Commanders who look good in exercises and staff meetings sometimes fail in battle. Sometimes, replacing a commander no matter the circumstance is critical. It happens all the time. It's been clear for some time now that Russia's war plan has been flawed from the beginning. A new war plan requires a new command. The new commander immediately ordered a barrage of missiles aimed at Ukraine.

War is about breaking the enemy's will to resist; a ruthless assault in which everything is seen as a possible target is the first step. The second step is to make clear to Russian soldiers that they face extreme danger from their own side if they fail to perform on the battlefield. Morale and motivation are important, but they don't work if the army is ill-equipped or its soldiers ill-trained. Firing missiles, then, signals what's in store for the future, but that future won't come only if troops are scared of their commanders. It comes with good training at all levels, with suitable weapons and other tools of modern warfare. Doing either, and ideally both, takes time. An opportunely timed missile barrage helps a little in this regard.

To buy more time, an attack from the periphery would help even more. There are reports of Russian forces in Belarus, for example, and rumors that the Belarusian army is readying for war. If true, a southward thrust out of Belarus might well buy time. It would force Ukraine to defend itself on another front, and it would threaten the Ukrainian supply line from Poland. This is easier said than done, of course. It's unclear whether Belarus is capable of fighting high intensity warfare, and the mere act of getting Russian troops there is difficult.

A peripheral attack may have been possible before the Ukrainian army became battle-hardened and before the U.S. started supplying weapons to Kyiv en masse. Likewise, a peace treaty might have been possible as well – that is, if anyone was seriously interested in it. None of it is possible when Russia is, by its own standards, weak. A missile barrage, coupled with the reconstructed Russian military, is likely meant to create leverage for Russia where none had existed. The studied ferocity of the new commander could, in theory, create a basis for a settlement.

Ultimately, the U.S. controls the war's course in Ukraine, and therefore Ukraine is hostage to American interests. But because Ukraine has lives at stake, it has a limit on how long and how intensely it will fight the war. The American goal is to keep Russian forces as far east as possible, away from NATO. The Russian goal is to regain all of Ukraine. So progress one way or another in this conflict depends to some degree on how credible the new Russian military leaders are and how they can motivate existing troops while building a new force come spring. Until then, they must demonstrate that the soldiers already there are to be taken seriously and that worse may yet be coming. They must frighten the Ukrainians and Americans. Next time, the criticism of someone like Kadyrov may not do. Production of weapons is the foundation of this war, and the U.S. dominates production. If Russia can't rapidly match that, it has to make some concessions, possibly major ones. That is the battle problem facing the new command.

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