AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE

The Looking Glass

The Sino-Russian partnership after Prigozhin's mutiny: the view from Beijing

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Centre for Defence Research, June 2023

Twenty-four June 2023 marked a swift beginning and end to a puzzling series of events in Russia. The mercurial Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of PMC Wagner Group, announced his fighters would undertake what he termed a 'march for justice'. It was aimed squarely against the 'incompetence' of the leadership of the Russian Ministry of Defense, namely Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov. Although this rift has been brewing for some time, it appears Shoigu's directive of 11 June that 'all volunteer detachments' in the 'special military operation' in Ukraine would have to sign contracts with the Ministry of Defense pushed Prigozhin and Wagner into an open mutiny. Within 24 hours, they had taken both Rostov-on-Don – the hub of the Southern Military District, which effectively coordinates the war in Ukraine – and brought a convoy to within 200 kilometers of Moscow.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, in a belated address to the nation at 10:00 am on 24 June, accused the unnamed leaders of the mutiny of outright 'treason' and of endangering the country's security, as it repels 'the aggression of neo-Nazis and their handlers'. This, Putin declared, was a 'stab in the back' akin to the breakdown and collapse of Tsarist Russia in 1917 – when 'intrigues, and arguments behind the army's back' resulted in the 'destruction of the army and the state, loss of huge territories' and in 'tragedy and a civil war'. The only beneficiaries then, and by implication now, 'were various political chevaliers of fortune and foreign powers who divided the country, and tore it into parts'. Despite this framing and his declaration that those responsible would be 'severely' punished, Putin through the intercession of Belarussian President, Alexander Lukashenko, subsequently declared Prigozhin and those Wagner mercenaries who desired it could 'freely' leave Russia for Belarus.

This bizarre episode raises many questions for outside observers. In this, our final *Looking Glass* for the Centre for Defence Research, however, we focus on what this affair might mean for Russia's 'no limits' partner, China.

We will first discuss how this affair is being perceived in Beijing – based on official state media reporting and some 'non-authoritative' views from Chinese analysts – and then examine some of the broader potential implications Prigozhin's adventure might have for China. We find that although the official response to the affair so far has been muted, the nature of official reporting

seeks to both put a positive spin on Putin's leadership and to reinforce China's preferred narratives on anti-regime actions.

One noteworthy 'non-authoritative' view of Prigozhin's mutiny, in contrast to official circumspection, emphasises the role of the Russian military's poor performance in Ukraine in stimulating Wagner's 'march for justice' and suggests that this can be seen as a product of the West's response to the Russian invasion. We then note that although the Prigozhin mutiny should objectively increase concern in Beijing about the usefulness of Russia as a strategic partner, the peculiarities of decision-making in Beijing make it unlikely there will be a fundamental reassessment of the alignment in the short term.

Putin stares down Prigozhin?

The official Chinese response to events in Russia has been muted. This should be unsurprising, given not only Beijing's investment in its strategic alignment with Moscow but also the agreement between key elements of each party's state media ecosystem that they will engage in 'mutually beneficial cooperation' in 'information exchange' to promote 'objective, comprehensive and accurate coverage of the most important world events'. This, as Joseph Torigian notes, means we should expect official Chinese state media to be circumspect in their coverage lest 'they get an earful from Russian diplomats' should they go off script.

So far, official state media reporting appears to be following this expected trajectory. For example, on 25 June, a day after the outbreak of the mutiny, an official statement from the meeting of Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Rudenko, simply noted that 'China–Russia political mutual trust has been deepened and pragmatic cooperation has continued to strengthen'. Meanwhile, in response to a journalist's question, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs more pointedly noted that the Wagner affair 'is Russia's internal affair', and China 'as a friendly neighbor and a comprehensive strategic cooperation partner in the new era…supports Russia in maintaining national stability and achieving development and prosperity'. This bland statement sums up China's official position to date on Prigozhin's 'march on Moscow'.

However, the way the incident has been reported in Chinese state media points to a more active posture than implied by the pro forma official position. It has been interesting to see how Chinese state media reporting has put a positive spin on Putin's role in neutralising this threat to his grip on power and deployed language that highlights China's preferred framing of anti-regime actions.

China Daily's initial and very brief report on Putin's 24 June national address, for example, emphasised the Russian President had 'ordered' the Russian military to 'neutralize those who organized the armed rebellion of the Wagner private military group'. It then noted that a 'counter-terrorist operation' had commenced 'to prevent possible terrorist acts' by Wagner. Construing anti-regime action as 'terrorism' has been a consistent theme in Chinese discourse. It has been particularly prevalent in official Chinese media treatment of recent political upheavals around the globe – from the Arab Spring to the various 'color revolutions' in the post-Soviet space – and it has served as a crucial discursive tactic in combating domestic security challenges.

Subsequent reporting focused more on Putin's leadership. *China Daily's* coverage of Putin's second address on 27 June emphasised the Russian President's firm grip on events with the headline, 'Putin lays out options for Wagner soldiers in national address'. The remainder of the report largely quoted Putin's assertions that most Wagner fighters were in fact 'patriots' who had been misled, and if Wagner had directly attempted an 'armed rebellion', it 'would have been suppressed in any case' without further comment.

On 25 June, *Xinhua* published a 'hot issue explainer' on the incident, which further revealed how state media was framing events in Russia. There were three notable themes here. First, Putin's speech of 24 June, in which he labelled the mutiny a 'stab in the back', was described as 'the key node for the easing of the Wagner incident'. According to this line of argument, it was in fact the 'firm' determination Putin displayed here that shook the 'will' of the mutineers. Second, the explainer quoted several Russian 'experts' to underscore that Putin's characterisation of the mutiny as treasonous was widely shared throughout Russian society. Finally, the ultimate resolution of Prigozhin's mutiny – that is the reported Lukashenko-brokered deal for Prigozhin

and Wagner fighters to go to Belarus – was portrayed as a result of Putin's magnanimous desire to 'avoid bloodshed' and Prigozhin's 'desperation' for a 'reconciliation' after finding himself pushed into a corner.

The core impression a reader would take from this 'explainer' would be that the crisis was defused by Putin's steadfast resolve and his closeness to the real sentiment of Russian society.

Some non-authoritative Chinese views are also apparent in the wake of Russian events and deserve comment. Shen Yi, professor of international politics at Fudan University, for example, posted a commentary on 26 June attempting to make sense of the Prigozhin mutiny and what it might mean for Russia, the war in Ukraine and for China.

The cause of the Wagner leader's mutiny, Shen notes, was the 'intensification of contradictions' between the mercenary group and the Russian Ministry of Defense, brought on by Shoigu's decree for 'volunteer' detachments to contract to the Ministry of Defense. Interestingly, however, Shen then analogises Shoigu (and also Gerasimov) to certain types of people in a 'corporate workplace', who have 'average business ability' but are 'very good at using rules and regulations to manipulate people, and good at using the system to achieve their own goals'. Here, Shen asserts that Prigozhin's grievances against such figures were justifiable. He contrasts Wagner's effective military service to the Russian state, particularly in Bakhmut, and the efficiency of its swift 'march of justice' (in Prigozhin's phrase) to the generally poor performance of the regular Russian military forces in Ukraine. 'For the past 24 hours', he emphasises in astonishment, 'a light infantry force, which in fact has no effective air defense and at most limited heavy equipment, has advanced wildly on the Great Plains [of Russia] without being stopped'. The implication for Putin, Shen suggests, is that the Wagner mutiny is but a symptom of 'growing discontent' that requires a focus on 'reform' of the military. From Putin's perspective, he suggests, the question is now whether the 'Wagner affair' will make it 'easier, or more difficult, to restructure the Ministry of Defense'.

Professor Shen then judges that the impact of this affair on the war in Ukraine has been minimal in an immediate sense, as 'Ukraine has not taken this opportunity to make a large-scale breakthrough' and 'Russia's existing fronts and military operations have not been affected or changed'.

Yet, he does note some wider implications or lessons to be drawn that are perhaps revealing of Chinese concerns. He suggests the Wagner affair can be seen as a component of 'three strategic weapons' the West has used against Russia since the start of the 'special military operation': the 'West's comprehensive sanctions against the Russian financial system'; the West's provision of 'advanced weapons' to Ukraine; and the hope that these first two would stimulate the third 'strategic weapon' of an 'outbreak of internal contradictions in Russia'. Needless to say, some in Washington have explicitly pointed to the example of US and NATO support for Ukraine as a model to be followed in the event of a Chinese move on Taiwan.

China and Russia after Prigozhin: watching, waiting…and worrying?

After these events, there remains a broad strategic question vis-à-vis Russia that would be troubling Beijing: does its war in Ukraine and this challenge to Putin's authority make Russia a less useful partner?

As we have examined at length in previous editions of the *Looking Glass*, there are clear complementarities of interests and ideology between Moscow and Beijing under Putin and Xi's leadership that give the relationship solidity. Most pointedly perhaps, as Beijing and Washington embrace 'strategic competition', is both Moscow and Beijing have chafed against what they see as American 'hegemony' and strive to facilitate the emergence of a 'multipolar' order where each will have a freer hand than they currently perceive themselves to have.

However, the distinction between the two leaders, as former CIA China analyst John Culver notes, is that:

> Xi—being more traditionally Marxist—saw this new world emerging over the course of this century, while Putin undertook direct actions—in Georgia, Syria, Ukraine, and Ukraine again—to hasten changes and reassert Russia's position as a great power.

'Beijing's reaction' to such actions, Culver concludes, 'can be summarized as "Bold! But strategically incompetent!"'

Although this could well be China's perception of its partner, there remain clear reasons for Beijing to stand by its beleaguered friend in Moscow. Ultimately, Beijing's calculus as to what it gets out of the relationship with Russia remains the same as it did prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Under Xi, the core objective has been the 'struggle' to attain the 'China Dream' of 'great national rejuvenation'. The primary obstacle the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sees standing in the way of that objective is a truculent and declining US hegemon. Close Sino-Russian ties, from China's perspective, are thus judged to be important, *so long* as they contribute to China's economic and military strength, and assist in constraining the US.

Here, the Prigozhin affair and the signs of brittleness that it has arguably exposed in Putin's regime, should prompt some critical thinking in Beijing as to whether the 'no limits' partnership is of declining usefulness to the attainment of its objective. Indeed, the fact that 'non-authoritative' commentators, such as Shen Yi, have noted the apparent incapacity of the Russian military and security services to quell Wagner's mutiny should seriously exercise minds in Zhongnanhai about not only Putin's longevity but also the acumen of Russia's military and intelligence services.

But in important ways even Russia's tribulations are useful to China. It has been clear since the start of Russia's war China has been watching to learn the military, strategic and economic lessons of the war in Ukraine. Chinese military analysts, for instance, have viewed the war as 'proving ground', by revealing the strengths and weaknesses of Russian and Ukrainian weapons systems, tactics and command and control technologies. Meanwhile, it has also been evident for some time that China has been closely monitoring the effects of Western economic sanctions against Russia and Russian efforts to work around them.

On balance however, the trajectory of Russian military failures, Putin's poor strategic acumen and incipient fractures within the regime, should prompt some level of reassessment in Beijing about the relationship.

Still, as we cautioned in the March 2023 *Looking Glass*, there are peculiarities of the Chinese context. Notably, Xi's tendency to over-estimate Russian strength and his close personal affinity for Putin combined with the stove-piped nature of Chinese security policy may make such an objective reassessment of Sino-Russian relations difficult, barring perhaps the complete collapse of Putin's regime. And even in that worst-case scenario for Beijing, its strategic interests would tend to dictate China would approach such an event pragmatically and seek a *modus vivendi* with whomever may emerge as Putin's successor.

A more immediate consequence of events in Russia, however, will likely be to reinforce Xi in his belief that the political loyalty of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to the CCP is just as important as the material and organisational elements of making it into a 'world class army'. Indeed, one of the major effects of Xi's implementation of sweeping reforms to the PLA in 2015 – including a complete overhaul of its leadership system – has been to concentrate decision-making in the hands of the Central Military Commission (of which Xi is chair), thereby ensuring that the Party 'controls the gun'. Even amidst discomfort about Russia's internal and strategic problems stemming from its war in Ukraine, then, there may perhaps be some self-satisfaction in Zhongnanhai that the Party has not missed the forest for the trees in this context.

Further reading

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