

## Putin Vs Prigozhin: The Coup and its Fallout

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The Wagner Group[1], the Russian mercenary group, most notable for the capture of Bakhmut from the Ukrainian Forces has now come to the limelight for another reason. After being hailed as heroes for capturing the Ukrainian city, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the Wagner Group, roused his troops in open rebellion, marching them to Moscow. Chief amongst his concerns was the Russian military establishment's treatment of the Wagner forces.[2] Recently, a video shot in Rostov[3] showed him standing in front of the bloodied bodies of slain Wagner troops yelling obscenities at Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and the Chief of the General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, calling them weak and incompetent, blaming them for the carnage[4].



Prigozhin began laying the foundation for the coup through Telegram (social media app) accusing Shoigu of ordering a rocket strike on the Wagner field camps in Rostov, causing a huge number of casualties, further stating, that he would move to punish the latter.[5] On 23 June 2023, Prigozhin through a series of messages on Telegram announced his intent to march to Moscow and oust the Defence Minister.[6]

This marks the biggest challenge to Putin's presidency since he took over office in 1999. Within the next ten hours of Prigozhin's announcement, the nearly 50,000 strong Wagner troops[7], crossed close to 200 kilometres of land in their march to Moscow to wrest control from the Kremlin.[8] In the end, curiously, the coup fizzled out, leaving expert scratching their heads. Oddly Prigozhin was satisfied with just a presidential pardon for the rebelling Wagner forces.[9]

The Wagner group's attempted coup could not have come at a worse time for the Russians. The Bakhmut victory had breathed a new life to Russia's advancement. But, the subsequent coup attempt, must have made Kremlin reconsider its strategy in Ukraine, this affords the West time to shore up the Ukrainians.

For Putin the coup is a matter of grave concern. The Russian forces at present, drawn largely from conscripts, do not have the resources to deal with the Wagner Group, which is manned by battle hardened mercenaries, majority of whom led lives operating on the wrong side of the law before accepting pardons to fight for the Russians in the Ukraine. A civil war between the Russian forces would mean an effective end of the war in Ukraine as the former would have to withdraw to defend the homeland. This would provide an opportunity to Kyiv to manoeuvre its way into North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Such a situation would effectively mean that the West can position NATO troops right on the Russian border. Which has always been a redline for the Russians. The prevention of its breach was the major reason for the Russians going to war in Ukraine.

For now, Putin might have won this round against Prigozhin but in the long run it fetters morale of the Russian Armed Forces. There is nothing more debilitating to a fighting force than the feeling percolating within the ranks, of not being able to trust the man next to you.

The longer the war continues, the worse the morale for the Moscow's forces is going to be, leaving Putin hard-pressed on all sides to break the stalemate or risk appearing weak. If Russian history is any indicator, it is not a situation Putin wants to find himself.

Russia has a troubled relation with failed rulers. Czar Nicholas Romanov II was shot, his bones dissolved in acid and thrown down a mine shaft.<sup>[10]</sup> Weakness in Russia is not tolerated. In all probability, the breach of the nuclear threshold is nearer than it was before. Because for the Russians losing the war in Ukraine is not an option. And with the morale of its forces sapping, there might not be another option available with Moscow.

Putin's control is slipping writes Fred Kaplan<sup>[11]</sup>, the author of *The Bomb: Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War*. On 23rd June, Putin had asked the most steadfast allies of the former Soviet Union—the leaders of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, who, with Russia, make up the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Putin's half-baked answer to NATO—for a public show of support. Their silence was telling, calling for a restoration of 'law and order', but otherwise calling the situation an 'internal Russian matter'.<sup>[12]</sup>

Putin, if not today, may be removed tomorrow. The attempted coup will not go down well with the Russian establishment, considering the downing of the helicopters and aircraft belonging to the Army by the Wagner forces.<sup>[13]</sup> Such actions cannot be forgiven by nations states and must therefore respond ferociously with strength.

Prigozhin is a marked man, given the outrage of the Russian public calling the police traitors for disappearing in the wake of the Wagner charge.<sup>[14]</sup> If such reaction is faced by the police, a mere bystander, then what can be expected by the instigator of the act? The hero who captured the Bakhmut bastion has now turned into villain in the Russian minds. Even the soldiers of the Wagner group have accused Prigozhin of 'walking off' from the coup and leaving the troops in a lurch.<sup>[15]</sup> Despite the pardon, Prigozhin could even end up dead, the Russian State is taking active action against the Wagner and Prigozhin's holdings in Russia.<sup>[16]</sup>

As far as the US led West is concerned, the general zeitgeist might lead an uninformed individual to take to the view that it strengthens the West by weakening Russia. However, the reality is completely different. If Prigozhin had succeeded, it would have been even worse for NATO and the US. The West has often accused Putin of being a hardliner but by

all accounts, Prigozhin, who once sent the European Union a fake blood covered sledgehammer in a violin box, is even higher on the particular spectrum. He has in the past hailed the gruesome killing of a deserter by a sledgehammer by the Wagner Group.<sup>[17]</sup> By all means, deserters in many countries are either court-martialled or hung till death but those actions are carried out, generally, in democracies through a judicial process. However, an execution going against this precedence suggests of a complete hardline followed by Prigozhin. The West should thank their lucky stars that such a man failed against Putin. Because his history suggests that he would breach the nuclear threshold much sooner than Putin would have.



Even now, after the failure of the coup, the situation may not be as easy to manage by the West. According to Mikhail Zygar, author of 'All the Kremlin's Men', "If Putin were to fall sometime soon, he could be succeeded by extremely hard-line elements supported by the security services, or a 'relatively' liberal clan represented by Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and the mayor of Moscow, Sergey Sobyannin".<sup>[18]</sup> Either way, both outcome points to a diplomatic nightmare for the West to manage. The coup, by all estimates, has hastened the use of nuclear arms. And if such a situation arises, the advantage lies with the Russians as Ukraine had surrendered their nuclear arms in the 90s.<sup>[19]</sup> Therefore, Kyiv would have to rely upon the munificence of the West.

Moreover, one would not be remiss in assuming the coup was somehow engineered by the West. For one, in its timing, design, and execution, the Wagner chief's coup bore the hallmarks of a well-prepared operation.<sup>[20]</sup> And the manner in which it ended, aping the suddenness with which it began also points to a foreign hand, designed to weaken the morale of the fighting forces and create a general mayhem. On the other hand, Prigozhin's actions may well have been self-induced. The stopping of hostilities just short of pitting Russians against Russians in deadly combat might have caused the signing of the deal and

withdrawing. Another reading of the situation may be seen as a Russian psychological operation. One designed to give outlook of internal weakness to goad a purported Ukrainian Spring Offensive, which has been talked off for a long time. Though the evidence of such is in short supply but the swiftness with which the attempted coup started and ended with no, till now, long term implications for the principal members in sight there maybe some credence to the thought.

As for the real reason behind the uprising, nothing can be assumed due a paucity of information. Only time will tell.

Back in the subcontinent, the effects on India will be minimal. India's aim in the increasing Russia-China camaraderie is to reduce the Moscow's dependence upon Beijing and Russia's is to diversify its list of friends following the reduced international relations it suffered in the wake of the Ukraine War. The only effect the attempted coup might have on India is if Russia decides to increase its presence in Ukraine, then the weapons supply to India would decrease or may even stop.

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**Vinayak Sharma is a holder of P.G. Diploma in Mass Communication from Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and works as a research scholar at the United Service Institution**

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