

The Wagner Rebellion: Examining the Implications

Background

On 24 June Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Wagner Group ordered his fighters to drive down the M4 highway in a 'march for justice' from Rostov-on-Don to Moscow demanding that Russia's defence leaders explain why they had prosecuted the war so ineptly. This was after his months-long campaign aimed at ousting Russia's Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu and Chief of General Staff General, Valery Gerasimov. He blamed them for a failed strategy and for the high Russian casualty rates.

He had earlier voiced his opinion that the Russian strategy 'lacked the aggressive edge needed to win and dominate'. Following this the Wagner Group had launched human wave attacks spearheaded by thousands of ex-prisoners in what he dubbed 'Operation Bakhmut Meat Grinder'. When realities of artillery fire and incremental gains due to trench and urban warfare brought in disappointing results over the winter Prigozhin then complained about ammunition scarcity to break through the line of contact.

In May there were a series of dramatic threats from Prigozhin; including 'a gruesome scene' where he shouted at Shoigu and Gerasimov on camera as he stood in a field strewn with corpses. Prigozhin repeatedly said that he planned to pull Wagner forces out of the decimated city. He had then announced a full withdrawal of his paramilitary contingent at the end of May, soon after its capture.

The mutiny by Yevgeny Prigozhin, referred to as 'Putin's Chef', and was his trusted protégé, has revealed cracks in Putin's supremacy and raised concerns about a civil war in Russia, which has the largest nuclear arsenal in the world.

It is said that Putin abetted the rise of Prigozhin and ignored the warning signs of his private military company. His star rose, reaching the high point when his forces took the city of Bakhmut for Russia in May.

Prigozhin's Armed Rebellion

Prigozhin, the Wagner Chief never publicly criticized Putin throughout the episode and has always said his feud was with the military leadership, namely Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov.^[i]

However, Prigozhin's influence seems to have grown exponentially. On the other hand, Shoigu apparently failed to account for the possibility that he lacked full control over Russia's Armed Forces. Though the waves of military defections Prigozhin had been banking on did not materialize, Wagner fighters were still able to occupy Rostov-on-Don virtually unopposed. In fact, crowds in Rostov-on-Don even cheered Prigozhin as he departed for Belarus with a no prosecution guarantee. ^[ii]

Such forces have served Russian interests in terms of plausible deniability. However, the lack of visible institutional command and control measures between the Armed Forces and the Wagner Group, at times created discordance. There is no doubt that 'if you keep snakes in your backyard, they can strike you'.

One of the questions remain unanswered is how the Russian security apparatus was apparently caught off guard by these events even though the US intelligence seems to had foresight of the impending events.

Putin's Position

It is now being reported that General Sergei Surovikin, nicknamed 'General Armageddon' known for his aggressive tactics in the Syrian conflict has been arrested. "Apparently, he [Surovikin] chose Prigozhin's side during the uprising" and they have gotten a hold of him," the Moscow Times said quoting a source.^[iii]

There is no doubt that the "lack of decisiveness" in putting down the mutiny "Has become a pretext for a massive purge in the ranks of the Russian Armed Forces".^[iv]

The German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has said the failed Wagner mutiny has weakened Vladimir Putin's authority, as the Russian President; "I do believe he is weakened as this shows that the autocratic power structures have cracks in them and he is not as firmly in the saddle as he always asserts".^[v]

President Joe Biden believed President Vladimir Putin had "absolutely" been weakened inside his country by the short-lived mutiny led by Yevgeny Prigozhin. But said it was "hard to tell" the extent to which Putin had been diminished.^[vi]

The fact, however, remains that while fissures may have been exposed, the mutiny has been quelled and is unlikely to lead to President Putin's ouster. But, an article in the 'Foreign Affairs,' states, "A nervous leader who inelegantly survived a domestic coup is more dangerous than a wartime autocrat who believes himself to be secure at home".^[vii]

Possible Scenarios

There are multiple ways to look at Prigozhin's revolt. Was the so-called 'March for Justice', the only logical option after factions in Russia's conventional forces first deprived Wagner of ammunition and then attacked Prigozhin's paramilitary cadre as they exited Bakhmut. President Putin however said it was a "stab in the back."

The history of Russia is replete with of palace coups, mutinies, and workers' revolutions. What needs to be understood is what Prigozhin's aims were? Was he trying to replace President Putin? Did he want lasting changes in Russia? Or was he acting on behalf of someone to target Shoigu and Gerasimov? Was the event stage managed? And finally, was he acting on behalf of an external player as has been suggested by some analysts? The definite answer may never be known as presently we are in the realm of speculation.

Or was this mutiny a desperate act by someone who felt he was cornered, and on the losing end of a power struggle between him and the Defence Establishment. Was the catalyst the recent Russian Ministry of Defense announcement that all private military companies and volunteer units would have to sign contracts with them. No doubt Prigozhin, wanted the Wagner Group, to maintain its status quo and autonomy and prevent it being subsumed. But the factional dispute became an open challenge to President Putin.^[viii]

Though the immediate threat was averted by a negotiated deal, through President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, the damage to the perception of Putin's domestic power and

invulnerability may have exposed a crack that can weaken the Russian political system in ways that will be difficult for Putin to overcome.

Michael McFaul, a former U.S. ambassador to Russia, said; "On balance, Putin is much weaker today, soldiers in Russia are all watching this and wondering, what's happened to our leader? And I think that's good. Because a weakened Russia might do less in terms of damage, principally in Ukraine".[\[ix\]](#)

However, in many cases, where coup attempts have failed, the rulers targeted have succeeded in reasserting their authority, stabilising their regimes, and preserving their hold on power.

"When push came to shove, he [Putin] found a way to avoid starting a civil war. He found a way to avoid bloodshed, and maybe he's found a way to get rid of his Wagner problem and his Prigozhin problem that has been festering for a long time," as per a statement by McFaul.[\[x\]](#) Basically, President Putin has been successful in sidelining a 'headache'.

The fear is whether this episode will result in President Putin's distrust of his military leadership, and Armed Forces, which could undermine Russia's long-term ability to project combat power and might force them to be more reliant on nuclear forces.

China's Stance

The Chinese released a statement calling the incident 'Russia's internal affair' and said it supported Russia's attempts at "maintaining national stability and achieving development and prosperity".[\[xi\]](#)

State media, also picked up on the theme of stability, noting the speedy resolution to the crisis by Putin's government. Yet despite public messaging downplaying the events, Elizabeth Wishnick, a senior research scientist at Columbia University's Weatherhead East Asian Institute said; "For Xi Jinping, developments in Russia this weekend would have had to be very concerning, as they raised questions about regime security, a concern for the Chinese leader".[\[xii\]](#)

"I think China will become more cautious in understanding that President Putin's control of his country may not be as solid as people used to think. The perception that he is (a) strong man in command of his country now has cracked," as per Shen Dingli, a Shanghai-based international relations scholar. [\[xiii\]](#)

China and Russia have long had a complex relationship but the two sides have become closer since President Xi came to power and more recently after declaring the 'no limits partnership', as also due to the friendship between the two leaders and their shared animosity towards the US. Both view the US as interfering in their perceived areas of influence be it Ukraine and Taiwan and both oppose expanded US influence in their respective regions.

But what will stand out now is that the Russia will remain the junior partner in their relationship.

Conclusion

At the time of the mutiny Ukrainian officials were discussing prospects for a peace deal with Russia in Copenhagen, Denmark being brokered by various countries including India. The contours of the 'Peace Formula', are still in the nascent stages, but there is no question that settling the status of Crimea and Russian occupied territories in Donbas as well as reparations

and payments for reconstruction in Ukraine will be key to any deal. The military reality of Russia occupying the 'oblasts' of Donetsk, Lubansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia may have to be accepted. The positioning of Wagner Forces which have still not been disbanded in Belarus does not bode well for the stability of the region. They remain a 'threat in being'.

Due to the signs of instability, the German Defence Minister, Boris Pistorius, announced a decision Berlin had resisted for many years: the permanent basing of a German Brigade in Lithuania, on NATO's Eastern flank.

The outcomes of the rebellion on the Ukraine War might have two extremes. While many assume that, the Russian military may get embroiled in infighting, which will give the Ukrainians openings to recapture more territory and push their counter offensive. The other view is that a humiliated Putin would likely get more belligerent in order not to be perceived as weak.

War has a life and character of its own which leaves its imprint in many ways. When Archimedes II and Pericles led Sparta and Athens, respectively, into the Peloponnesian War in 431 BC as documented by Thucydides, neither was alive in 404 BC when the war ended. The political landscape had been totally reshaped by war, changing both goals and objectives with it. There is no doubt that similar changes may be observed which may not only be restricted to Russia. However, presently the focus of President Putin will be on consolidation of power, elimination of perceived threats within Russia and escalation of operations against Ukraine.

However, the Wagner rebellion does expose the complex and intricate power dynamics and will have far reaching implications.

Endnotes

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[iv] Andrew Osborn, Where are Russian generals Gerasimov and Surovikin after Wagner rebellion? The Reuters, June 29, 2023 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/where-are-russias-top-generals-rumours-swirl-after-mercenary-mutiny-2023-06-28/>

[v] Soraya Ebrahimi, Germany's Scholz: I kept 'very quiet' during aborted Russia mutiny, The National News, Jun 29, 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/2023/06/28/germanys-scholz-i-kept-very-quiet-during-aborted-russia-mutiny/>

[vi] Ken Bredemeier, Biden: Putin ‘Absolutely’ Diminished by Wagner Group Mutiny, VoA 28 June 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/biden-putin-absolutely-diminished-by-wagner-group-mutiny/7158977.html>

[vii] Liana Fix and Michael Kimmage, The Beginning of the End for Putin?, The Foreign Affairs, June 27, 2023 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/beginning-end-putin-prigozhin-rebellion>

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[x] Ibid

[xi] Chen Qingqing and Fan Anqi, China supports and believes Russia in maintaining national stability, The Global Times, 26 June 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202306/1293202.shtml>

[xii] Erin Hale, China unlikely to be worried by ‘weaker Putin’ post Wagner revolt, Al Jazeera, 29 Jun 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/29/china-unlikely-to-be-worried-by-weaker-putin-post-wagner-revolt>

[xiii] Ibid

Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd) is a Distinguished Fellow at the USI of India. Commissioned in 1981 into the 18 Cavalry, he has held various important command and Staff appointments including command of an Armoured Division.

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