

The China-Russia partnership after Prigozhin's mutiny: The view from Beijing

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June 24 saw the swift beginning and end of a puzzling series of events in Russia. The mercurial Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the private military contractor Wagner Group, announced that his fighters would be undertaking what he termed a 'march for justice' aimed squarely against the 'incompetence' of the leadership of the Russian Ministry of Defence, namely Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov.

Then, in a belated address to the nation at 10 a.m. on June 24, Russian President Vladimir Putin, [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 greatest catastrophe' of the 'destruction of the army and the state, loss of huge territories, resulting in a 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, following the intercession of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, Putin subsequently declared that Prigozhin and those Wagner mercenaries who desired it could 'freely' leave Russia for Belarus.

Meanwhile, Prigozhin called off the Wagner Group march toward Moscow, saying he did so to avoid bloodshed. '[I]t was obvious that at that moment a lot of blood would be shed. We felt that demonstrating what we were going to do was sufficient,' the Wagner chief claimed on Monday.

This bizarre episode raises many questions for outside observers, not least perhaps for Putin's 'no limits' partner in Beijing. An examination of how this affair is being perceived in China – based on a reading of official state media reporting and some 'non-authoritative' views of some Chinese analysts – suggests that although there is a recognition of the weaknesses of the Putin regime, Beijing will be unlikely to fundamentally reassess its alignment with Moscow in the near term due to both the continued convergence of interests and Xi Jinping's apparent personal commitment to the relationship.

Putin the Resolute?

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 due to an [agreement](#) between key elements of each party's state media ecosystem to 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 has [noted](#), means that we should expect official Chinese state media to be circumspect in their coverage lest ‘they get an earful from Russian diplomats’ for going off-script.

So far China’s official state media reporting appears to be following this expected trajectory.

An official [statement](#) following the meeting of Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Rudenko, a day after the outbreak of the mutiny, for example, simply noted that ‘China-Russia political mutual trust has been deepened and pragmatic cooperation has continued to strengthen.’

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs more pointedly [noted](#) that the Wagner issue ‘is Russia’s internal affair’ and China ‘as a friendly neighbour 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 Foreign Ministry statement. Chinese state media have reported on these events in such a way as to achieve two goals: putting positive spin on Putin’s role in neutralizing this threat to his grip on power and highlighting China’s preferred framing of anti-regime actions.

China Daily’s [initial](#) and very brief report on Putin’s June 24 national address, for example, emphasized the Russian president had ‘ordered’ the Russian military to ‘neutralize those who organized the armed rebellion of the Wagner private military group,’ before noting 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 ‘colour revolutions’ in the post-Soviet space, and 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 June [27 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 (without further comment) Putin’s assertions that most Wagner fighters were in fact ‘patriots’ that had been misled and that should Wagner have directly attempted an ‘armed rebellion’ it ‘would have been suppressed in any case.’

Xinhua [published](#) a ‘hot issue explainer’ on June 25 that further revealed how state media is framing events in Russia. There are three notable themes here.

First, Putin’s speech of June 24, in which he labelled the mutiny as a ‘stab in the back,’ is 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 that Putin displayed here that shook the ‘will’ of the mutineers.

Second, the explainer quotes several Russian ‘experts’ to underscore that Putin’s characterization of the mutiny as treasonous was widely shared throughout Russian society.

Finally, the ultimate resolution of Prigozhin’s mutiny – i.e. the reported Lukashenko-brokered deal for Prigozhin and Wagner fighters to go to Belarus – is 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 that a reader takes from this ‘explainer’ is that the crisis was defused by Putin’s steadfast resolve and his closeness to the real sentiment of Russian society.

Contradictions among the (Russian) people?

Yet, there have also been some non-authoritative Chinese views in the wake of Russian events that suggest a greater awareness of the challenges confronting Putin and their potential implications for China.

Xu Wenhong, a Russia specialist from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, [noted](#) that although the resolution of the crisis was ‘critical to Russia’s overall national interests and conforms to the common wishes of the ordinary people’ it nonetheless ‘reveals that social, economic and political problems have been rising since the Russia-Ukraine conflict.’

Similarly, Yu Sui of the China Center for Contemporary World Studies, [remarked](#) bluntly that the ‘conflict between mercenaries and the Russian army is only the tip of the iceberg about the inherent contradictions in Russian society.’

However, Shen Yi, professor of International Politics at Fudan University, [provided](#) perhaps the most interesting immediate reflection by a Chinese analyst on 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 began, was the ‘intensification of contradictions’ between the mercenary group and the Russian Ministry of Defence brought on by Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu’s decree earlier this month for ‘volunteer detachments’ in the ‘special military operation’ (Russia’s name for its ongoing invasion of Ukraine) to contract to the Ministry of Defence. Shen [drew an analogy between](#) Shoigu (and also Chief of Staff of the Russian Army Valery 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.’

Shen asserted that Prigozhin’s grievances against such figures are justifiable, contrasting 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 emphasized in astonishment, ‘a light infantry force, which in fact has no effective air defence and at most limited heavy equipment, has advanced wildly on the Great Plains [of Russia] without being stopped.’

Although the impact of this affair on the war in Ukraine was minimal, as ‘Ukraine has not taken this opportunity to make a large-scale breakthrough,’ Shen argued that the mutiny stands as a symptom of ‘growing discontent’ that requires a focus on the ‘reform’ of the military. From Putin’s perspective, Shen wrote, the key question is now whether the ‘Wagner affair’ will make it ‘easier, or more difficult, to restructure the Ministry of Defence.’

In an assessment that is perhaps revealing of Chinese official concerns, Shen suggested that the Wagner affair can be seen as a component of ‘three strategic weapons’ that 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 will stimulate the third ‘strategic weapon’ of the ‘outbreak of internal contradictions in Russia.’ Significantly, this is a model that [some](#) in Washington have explicitly pointed to as one to be followed in the event of a Chinese move on Taiwan.

China and the Sino-Russian partnership after Prigozhin: Watching, waiting, ...commiserating?

There remains a broad strategic question vis-à-vis Russia that remains unanswered in these Chinese responses to the Prigozhin affair: Does Russia’s war in Ukraine and this challenge to Putin’s authority make Russia a less useful partner for China?

There are clear complementarities of interests and ideology between Moscow and Beijing under Putin and Xi’s leadership that give the relationship solidity. Most importantly, both Moscow and Beijing have chafed against what they see as U.S. ‘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, there is a distinction between how both leaders see such ‘multipolarity’ occurring. Xi, as former CIA China analyst John Culver [noted](#), ‘being more traditionally Marxist’ sees ‘this new world emerging over the course of this century’ while Putin has undertaken ‘direct actions – in Georgia, Syria, Ukraine, and Ukraine again – to hasten changes and reassert Russia’s position as a great power.’

Culver suggested that ‘Beijing’s reaction’ to such Russian moves ‘can be summarized as ‘Bold! But strategically incompetent!’

Such an assessment can only have strengthened after each setback suffered by the Russians in Putin’s war in Ukraine.

Yet 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** that China sees standing in the way of that objective is a truculent and declining U.S. 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 United States.

Here, the Prigozhin affair, and the signs of **brittleness** that it has 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 those objectives. At the very least 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 inspire thought in Zhongnanhai about not only Putin’s longevity but the acumen of Russia’s military and intelligence services.

But it is also important to note that even Russia’s tribulations may be proving useful to China. It has been clear since February 2022 that 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’ as it reveals 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 conversely 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 Putin regime should prompt some level of reassessment in Beijing about the relationship.

One immediate consequence of events in Russia will likely be to reinforce Xi in his belief that the political loyalty of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is just as important as the material and organizational 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 amid 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 CCP has not missed the forest for the trees in this context.

A fundamental reassessment of the relationship, however, appears unlikely given Putin’s survival and the underlying shared strategic interests between the two. This is also reinforced by Xi’s **tendency** to overestimate Russian strength, his close personal affinity for Putin, and the **stove-piped** nature of Chinese security policy, which means critical or negative assessments of Russia’s trajectory may not make it to the apex of decision-making.

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